











# THE GOLDEN VALLEY

Pioneering in the Australian bush has produced only a fraction of the literature inspired by the development of the American Wild West, but its history is no less thrilling and no less packed with adventure. This is a story of pioneers in New South Wales in the days when convicts, deported from England were assigned to the venturesome few who dared the perils and the climate of the interior, and opened up the virgin land.

The story of Golden Valley is the story of the Wades and the Kanes and of Martin O'Callaghan, a deported Irish rebel who had won his freedom and had built his own homestead between the rival settlers. All three were squatters in a wild land, peopled by aborigine natives who watched their encroachment with suspicious fear. O'Callaghan was the only one to win the confidence of the tribal chief and his tales of the customs and superstitions of the natives—who still survive in some parts of Australia—are part of the story of Golden Valley.

But the chief danger came from the Colonial Pastoral Company, who obtained title to the land bordering the valley and had every intention of securing this fertile land for themselves. With a villainous ex-convict in charge of the Company's newly acquired territory, who soon realized how to exploit the situation to his own advantage, and was not long in discovering the usefulness of rum in firing native animosity, the unprotected homesteaders faced annihilation.

The story is based on an account of Oxley's discovery of the Peel River in 1818 and is told by a man who has grown up in the valley, with the formidable mountain fastnesses as his playground, and his mind enthralled from childhood with hero-worship of those who braved heart-breaking isolation, the perils of drought and flood, and the terrors of massacre, to build a new country from a wilderness.

# THE GOLDEN VALLEY

BY  
FRANK O'GRADY



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TO

MY FATHER

who made this book possible



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## INTRODUCTION

As the city-born boy, approaching manhood, delves with youthful enthusiasm into the histories of his sporting idols, so the bush youngster—the true child of nature—indulges his fertile mind in hero-worship and imaginings peculiar to his environment.

The silent beauty of the Golden Valley always enthrals me. Its emerald carpet formed my childhood home—its formidable mountain fastnesses my playground. In lieu of dragons, giants and ogres, its fires and thunder, its droughts and floods, terrorized my childish fancy. But always my imagination, nurtured by such surroundings, carried me back to the worship of my heroes—those dogged, determined wanderers whom we term the Pioneers.

And as curiosity grew with age I desired to learn more about them. The names of Oxley and Mitchell became synonymous with courage and endurance. But what of those early squatters—those men and women who first revelled in the Golden Valley's peculiar beauty; who first breathed its champagne air and fought against its sinister dangers, conquering them for us? Who were they? What became of them?

In my search for information I read the following extract from *The Origin and History of Tamworth and District*, compiled by C. B. Newling and A. J. Prentice, B.A., and published in 1918 to celebrate the centenary of Oxley's discovery of the Peel River (September 2nd, 1818):

'Major Mitchell's narrative justifies us in now publishing what we were told by Mr. William Telfer, but could hardly credit, that before the Australian Agricultural Company took up Goonoo Goonoo, a Mr. Cann, a Cornishman, had a cattle station where now are Cann's Plains, opposite Bowling Alley Point, and a Mr. Joseph Brown had both sides of the river from where Tamworth now is, to, and including, the Attunga country, as a cattle station. We hope this publication

will lead to more information about Mr. Cann and Mr. Brown, and as to who were the holders, in 1831, of the other cattle stations between Loder's, at Cuerindie, and Brown's, at Wallamoul.'

In this narrative I have given a possible answer. I have given it as a tribute to the conquests and noble defeats of those valiant herots of the past—to the silent glory of the purple Moonbis and the exquisite grandeur of the Valley of the Peel.

F. O'G.

## CHAPTER I

JOHN KANE

ON a certain day in the early summer of the year 1833, a young man, broad of shoulder and long of limb, reined in his stock horse at the head of the mountain pass, released the leading rope of his pack animal and, climbing from the saddle, seated himself on a fallen tree trunk with the weariness born of a long and lonely journey.

'Charcoal,' he said, 'you've earned a spell after that sweltering climb, and you don't need it more than I do.'

The big black gelding shook the sweat from his flanks with a snort of uncasiness, as a slight whistling sound broke the stillness of the hot mountain air. An eagle-hawk, circling tirelessly in the bronze-blue sky, dropped to a lower plane as though to study the intruders in its domain. The young man reached for the long rifle strapped behind his saddle, but the great bird, its curiosity satisfied, glided away into the valley below.

The traveller resumed his seat, and allowed his languid gaze to follow the eagle-hawk's flight across the rolling plains of kangaroo grass, dotted with box and apple trees, until it disappeared beyond the deep, green, gum forests bordering the River Peel; doubtless returning to its haunt in the rounded heads of the blue and purple Moonbi Mountains, barely visible in the heat-quivering distance to the north.

The young man rose, attended to the girths of his pack-horse, and mounting, began the long and precipitous descent on the northern side of the Wallabadahs. The heat grew more intense as he entered the valley and the sun approached its zenith, but the young man's spirits rose at the thought that his journey was nearing its end. With the mountains behind him, and the

rolling plains of the valley's basin before, he swung his horses into an easy canter, and relaxed in the saddle.

The river, now merely a chain of water-holes after the long drought, presented no obstacle. He rode down the gently sloping bank, watered his horses, and turned eastward through forests of huge red gums and dried swamp lands. This was Wade's country—good grazing land, particularly in dry weather, fed by subterranean water. Wade's country! Almost forbidden territory. John Kane eased himself in the saddle. In all this vast valley there were but three holdings—Wade's, Kane's and O'Callaghan's. 'Why must there be enmity, and bitterness and quarrels? It was a wide, open country, with room for all. Was Joe Kane too small for the land which he occupied? No—loyalty to his father dispelled the thought. Alex Wade was responsible for the rift. And after all, the Kanes were the first to settle in the valley.

Through the timber John saw a mob of blue kangaroos feeding in a clearing. Instinctively he felt for his rifle, then checked himself. Why should he worry about kangaroos eating Wade's grass? The drought had driven the marsupials down from the hills to compete with the cattle for the herbage on the river flats. But they were Wade's cattle. John was angry—chagrined to find himself being infected with his father's hostility and lack of charity. But the kangaroos had gone now, alarmed at the approach of the horses. Joe Kane, uncharitable, hostile? John gave it up and rode on, across the mouth of Yellow Creek, near its junction with the river. Across more flats and dried swamps, then the country took on a gradual change, the contours rising gently as the horseman progressed eastward. The river, no longer a chain of sluggish lagoons and billabongs, became a flowing mountain stream, its pools fringed by clean sand, its bed paved with basalt pebbles, its rapids seams of water-washed stone.

He was climbing now, into the higher country, where the heat was tempered with a gentle breeze. Bird life, quiescent in the still, humid atmosphere of the lower lands, was here active and noisy. Soldier-birds shrieked and whistled their protest against the human invader. Babblers, the gossips of the bush-

land, gathered in family groups and chattered in ceaseless clamour. Magpies carolled as they searched the grassy flat lands for grubs and beetles. Butcher-birds sang their lilting tunes from the tree tops where kookaburras laughed in happy abandon. John was almost home now, and his singing heart joined with the bushland choir of welcome.

With the Moonbis behind him and, on his left, Mulla Mountain rearing its great, cliff-faced crown into the sky, John left the river and turned south-east, ascending the gently rising contours. As the sun settled down below the trees to the west a small, cleared, high plain opened out before him, and he was home.

A large rambling building, constructed of rough-hewn timber slabs, with a bark roof, dominated the clearing. There was no fence or palisade. Simply the homestead, standing on a stony knoll, with a small vegetable garden on either side.

'Hullo, John! Back again already? Mum was saying you ought to be home to-day or to-morrow. How did you find Port Stephens?' The big man with iron-grey hair had been lounging on the open veranda.

'Still the same, Dad. I've got a few things to tell you about. Everyone all right?'

'Pretty well. You can talk after you have had a feed. Go in and see Mum and have your tea. I'll look after the horses.'

The generosity of her native Cornwall had come to the colony with Mary Kane. Adventurous in spirit, yet quiet and unobtrusive, completely devoted to her husband and to her family, she was a nation builder—her life courageously dedicated to making the hardships of the pioneers more bearable. Sorrow and suffering had lined her features, but had not impaired her genial, busy personality. The loss of three children in infancy had only served to increase her love and care for those remaining. One of Mary Kane's axioms, conceived probably in the mother country, and nurtured in the Australian bush, was that 'the men must be fed'. She had heard John's approach from the river, and as he entered the dining-room, the hungry traveller's nostrils were assailed by the odour of grilling steak.

John kissed his mother affectionately.

'You look tired, lad, and you must be hungry,' she said.

'The steak's nearly done. The others are not in yet, but you have yours, and you can talk while the rest of them have their tea.'

In common with most of the early squatters' homes, the 'dining-room' was the principal room in the establishment. It was a singularly large apartment. In the centre was a rough slab table set on legs which were embedded in the clean-swept, earthen floor. A great, open fireplace of stone slabs occupied practically one half of the eastern wall. The crude bush furniture, in its cleanliness, bore evidence of a woman's care. This was the living-room of the house—for eating, smoking, reading and yarnning.

John was half-way through his meal when his father entered with the remainder of the station's establishment, all tired from their hard day riding the boundaries. Allan Kane, John's brother, was a clean-cut, rangy youth, quietly spoken and singularly mature for his eighteen years. The Australian bush is peculiar that way—under its influence maturity comes early. The other boundary rider was a little, stockily built man of uncertain age, who grunted a greeting to John and went out to wash his hands.

When appetites had been satisfied, and pipes lighted, Joe Kane took off his boots and tilted back his chair.

'How did you get on at the Port, John?' he asked. 'Sell those hides all right?'

'Well, I was going to tell you, When we reached Port Stephens the *Southern Pride* was in, and O'Callaghan got a passage in her and took both our lots down to Port Jackson. He said he could get a better market down there.'

'O'Callaghan gone to Sydney to sell hides!' said his father incredulously. 'I always reckoned Martin had a bit of sense. After paying freight to Sydney, he couldn't make any more out of 'em than if he sold 'em to the Company. What's the matter with the man? He must have got a touch of the sun.'

'That's what I thought at the time,' said John. 'Martin seemed to be acting queerly. When we got down to Hardy's office, Martin told me to wait and he'd send a couple of men out to help me unload the hides off the pack-horses. He was in the

office about half an hour, and when he came out his face was white and he was wild. "Come on, Jack," he says, "we'll take this stuff down and load it on the *Southern Pride*, and these fellows can go to hell." I didn't ask any questions, because you know what Cal's like when he talks that way, and you asked him to take charge; so I reckoned it wasn't my business. But after we'd fixed up with Tomlins—he's running the *Southern Pride* now—Cal, thinking all the while, goes up to Tomlins and says loud, so that I can hear him, "I'll go down with you, Bill, and see that this stuff's sold all right. I can do with a holiday and a sea voyage anyway." Then he turns around to me and says, "Jack, take my horses over and leave 'em at Jones's. Tell him I'll be back for 'em when this old hulk makes another trip up. Take it easy going home, lad, and tell your father that I heard hides were selling well in Sydney, and took 'em down there." So I came back on my own, Dad. It's got me beat. I'm hanged if I know what to make of it all.'

Joe Kane had come to New South Wales during the governorship of Lachlan Macquarie. Dissatisfied with conditions in Cornwall, he had emigrated with his young wife, and had obtained a small grant of land at Parramatta. John and Allan were born there, and a daughter who died in infancy. Two convict servants had been assigned to the family—Alice Carlisle, a sickly girl of low mentality, and, later, Martin O'Callaghan. Alice Carlisle suffered from a chronic lung complaint but she was devoted to Mary Kane. A physician in Sydney thought that the high altitude of the northern inland country might help the girl, and Joe wanted female company for his wife. Alice, therefore, had accompanied the family to the Golden Valley. The poor girl had assisted at the birth to Mary Kane of twin boys; but now, two small graves behind the house held the remains of the little ones, and Alice Carlisle, a victim of tuberculosis, rested beside them.

Joe Kane had clear recollections of his first meeting with Martin O'Callaghan. He remembered now; he was working in his fruit orchard, when two uniformed soldiers approached him. They had between them a tall, athletic-looking youth whose high forehead, square jaw and wide-set, deep blue eyes

bespoke an intelligence and determination far above those of the ordinary convict.

‘Martin O’Callaghan, Irish rebel, sentenced to penal servitude in the Colony. Conduct excellent; your assignee, Mr. Kane. Treat him well.’

Joe Kane remembered the words well. The conduct of his assignee had been more than excellent. O’Callaghan had obtained his ticket of leave six months afterwards, and a year later, Joe had taken him with his own family on his great adventure to the far north, to breed cattle in the Golden Valley. On Joe Kane’s recommendation, Martin had taken up two thousand acres on the Lower Peel, and for three years they had been the only settlers in this remote country. Then the Wade family came, and occupied all of the grazing land between the two squatters. Joe had dreams for the future of his sons and this intrusion had irritated him. The two families soon fell out. O’Callaghan, extremely generous by nature, could not share this enmity; and such was the character of the man that he had become friendly with the Wades without an atom of disloyalty towards his benefactor.

Joe Kane relit his pipe. He had no doubts about O’Callaghan. The Irishman must have had some good reason for his strange behaviour and that reason could mean danger to Kane’s family. Perhaps O’Callaghan had not taken John into his confidence because the Irishman was not sure of his ground.

Whilst Joe was engaged with his thoughts the stockily built man, whose name was Alf Dillon, entertained the boys and Mary Kane with an account of a ‘singular damned thing it minded him of’ that happened twenty years ago when he was soldiering down at Port Jackson.

‘Well,’ said Joe Kane at length, ‘I suppose Cal knows what he’s doing. If he thought Hardy was trying to beat him in a deal he’d take the trip to Sydney rather than give in. What sort of a trip did you have, John?’

‘Fairly good. We had some trouble on the way down. There’s been a lot of heavy rain on the coast—no drought there. We lost one horse with a load of Cal’s hides. You know where you cross the river coming down out of the hills towards Port



Stephens? Well, the river was in full flood. We tied the pack-horses together but the last one—one of Cal's—got out of its depth, and I don't know whether it was the weight of the hides on its back or what, but it went down. We had to cut the lead, and the current washed it downstream. It's just as well we didn't have to take any fat stock down this trip.'

'We didn't have any ready for this trip, and we won't have any for the next unless we get some rain,' said Joe. 'Apart from the Company's crowd, did you strike any settlers at the Port?'

'Only one of the Loders from Cuerindie. They're having a hell of a dry time down there. A lot of their cattle are starving. Loder told me their main industry is skinning stock. He was down with a great load of hides.'

'Yes, I think all the inland country is suffering from this drought. How's the grass down on the river flats, Allan?'

'Pretty good, Dad, but it isn't going to last for ever. If it doesn't rain soon we'll have to take that lot of heifers off and run 'em down on to the Yellow Creek side. I saw more 'roos down there on the flat this morning than I have ever seen before in my life. The drought must be driving 'em down out of the Moonbis.'

'We don't want to put any more over on the Creek, Allan, while we got any grass at all. If we do we'll have to have at least one man there all the time to keep 'em from crossing.'

'Well,' said Alf, 'it's a singular kind of thing if a man can't put cows where he likes in this country. Reminds me of the time when——'

'We can't always be fighting Wades, Joe,' Mary Kane broke in. 'After all, they are squatters the same as we are, even if they did settle here a few years later; and everybody's got an equal right to life and contentment.'

'Well, Mary, perhaps you're right and perhaps you're not,' said Joe reflectively. 'There's no need to worry yet awhile.'

John turned to his father.

'I can't understand why the Wades came up here, Dad,' he said. 'By all accounts they came overland from the Hawkesbury country. Wouldn't you think they'd have settled on the

Coal River? There must have been plenty of good land available there at that time.'

'Mr. Oxley's account of this valley brought 'em here, John—the same as it did me. I don't think there's much good country left on the Hunter now, unless you go right up to the head of the river. And when you get down on the lower eastern part, the floods make it a bad risk.'

'Some of the people at Port Stephens were talking about that,' said John. 'They've just had a terrible flood above Newcastle. I think they draw the long bow a bit, but they said the river rose more than fifty feet. A lot of property and stock were lost and some of the settlers were lucky to get out of it alive. But I've often wondered why Wade came up here.'

'I had a call from one of his daughters while you were away, lad. The younger one, it was. She came over with one of Wade's stockmen. I met them down the river a bit. Cheeky little minx, she is. I felt like pulling her off her horse and giving her a good spanking.'

'Why, what did she say, Dad?'

'Gave me a lecture about her father's rights and so on. Anyhow, rather than let my stock starve I'll run 'em from Yellow Creek to O'Callaghan's boundary, Wades or no Wades.'

This statement met with Alf Dillon's approval. He minded the time when he'd have said just the same thing, then announced his intention of going to his bunk. Shortly afterwards, the others followed his example.

## CHAPTER II

### A HOLIDAY, AND MOLLIE WADE

WHEN the morning chores were done, and breakfast eaten, Joe Kane asked John what the country looked like along the flats near Yellow Creek.

'I only saw Wade's end of the flats,' said John. 'There's still

plenty feed there, but the 'roos are there in droves. The drought still got you worried?'

'Yes. I think you had better take one of the horses and have a look at the country in the angle between Yellow Creek and the Peel, on our side. We might have to run a mob down there before the month's out. Even if we get rain soon, and that seems unlikely, it'll be a few weeks before there's much new grass up here. While you're down there you might get a cod or two. You remember the big one that Alf Dillon caught when the river was low the year before last? He caught it in a deep hole where Yellow Creek joins the Peel. We'll expect you home some time to-morrow or the next day.'

John was elated. This was to be a holiday, and he knew that his father meant it to be so. And Mary Kane was a party to the conspiracy. John's saddle-bag was packed with food. Home-baked cakes, fresh damper, cooked meat and some of the best dainties from the store at Port Stephens. John selected his fishing lines and set off through the bracing morning with a song in his heart.

It was early. The sun, but recently risen above the Dividing Range to the east, as yet had little effect upon the night-cooled earth. The trees glistened with dew, the grass was wet and the air held that faint aroma of eucalyptus which gladdens the heart upon a summer morning on the tablelands.

Through the yellow box and apple trees, clean boled and high branched, occasionally skirting a thicket of wattle, John cantered westward. Since his youthful escapades on the Parramatta River, fishing days had been scarce. Only after heavy rains were fish to be caught up here in the high country, where the river ran fast and falls and rapids kept the big fellows away. And journeys down to the river flats were long and there was always work to do. But oh! how John loved to fish.

Out of the high country now, and on to the sloping plains where timber was more sparse; where the kangaroo grass grew gaunt and pale, dried with the summer sun and the drought; where his horse's hooves struck dust from the hard, parched earth. The sun was climbing and the balm had gone from the

air. Flecks of sweat showed where saddle harness chafed his horse's hide. John reined down to a fast amble and thought—a little of Hardy and O'Callaghan and Port Stephens; a little of his family and the Wades; occasionally of the blacks, who were friendly always, and co-operative—but mainly of fish. Would there be any big cod down there, penned in the deep holes by the drought, and grown fat with inactivity? Would he be able to tempt them to his bait, or would they be too well fed with easy-caught sustenance? What should he use—earth-worms, grubs, parrots, locusts? Worms were hard to find this weather; parrots meant using his rifle, and shooting so close to Wade's holding might cause an argument. The old hands always claimed that grubs were the best bait for cod. Therefore grubs it would be, if he could find any.

Now the line of the river showed in the distant north-west. A vein of heavy timber, deep green in colour, and beyond it, the blue-hazed Moonbis. The sun was high now, and slanting westward. Yellow Creek was crossed—a dry watercourse here, with nothing for the thirsty horse. John swung northward, across the flats. Beneath the tall red gums there was grass, green and nutritious, but not over-luxuriant. Kangaroos were plentiful, and wallabies and wallaroos. Heavens, it must be dry, to send wallabies down from the hills. But this country would keep cattle alive for months yet, and it was part of Kane's recognized holding.

‘Good news for Dad,’ thought John, ‘but I think the old man knows it anyway, and has used this as an excuse to send me off for a holiday. Well, I'm not complaining.’

A drink for his horse at a water-hole in the Peel; a sandwich or two on a grassy bank, washed down with a cold draught from his water bag, and John was in the saddle again, heading westward, downstream, towards the Yellow Creek junction. At times, where the river twisted northward, John left its banks to retain his course; and when it angled south, he crossed to pick it up again, further westward. The sun was near the horizon when he struck the great delta of the junction.

A pair of hobbles for his horse; saddle and pack off; a quick, hot fire with little smoke for a billy of tea; a reconnaissance for

Alf's deep hole, and for grub-bearing trees whilst the billy boiled—this was the life.

John cleaned up the tea things and put them back into his pack. A grove of she-oaks by the river held promise, but he searched the boles of a number before he found the tell-tale sign. His clasp-knife cut deep through the bark and sap wood, following the line of the tiny hole, and a wood grub was his reward, blue-grey in colour, the size of a peanut shell, soft and succulent. Another in the same tree, then more prospecting, until the deepening shadows ended his search. With a dozen good grubs in his pouch, John began to fish the water-hole.

It was a deep, blue pool, some four hundred feet in length and fifty wide, set in an angle of the river and scoured out, over the ages, by the flood waters of Yellow Creek. The hole extended back from the river into the mouth of the creek. In the delta of the junction the banks were low, and sloping to a sandy beach. Opposite the creek mouth, cliffs of rich alluvial soil rose sheer for twenty feet. Roots of trees protruded here and there into the water, and here and there were twisted logs, left by the last flood. 'A nasty place to land a fish,' thought John, 'but a likely place to find one.'

The bushman's fishing-rod—a long sapling or bamboo with a length of strong line attached—had not developed at this early stage in the history of fishing in the western river system. John used a goodly length of cord twist, with a rusted nut off a dray for a sinker and with two hooks, each attached to its trace, some feet above the weight. The deep channel on the far side of the pool held the most likely promise. He unwound about forty feet of line and re-coiled the cord back on to the sandy beach. Then, a few deft circles above his head, and the sinker struck the darkening pool beneath the northern bank, the arcing line settling gently upon the water. Till the sun had gone and the twilight changed to night, John sat patiently, moving his line a little at intervals, taking up the slack, but the cod showed no interest. As evening settled in, the still air by the river livened to the drone of myriads of mosquitoes. John examined his bait, re-cast his line, and after securing the end to a springy

sapling, removed his camping gear to a higher site away from the river, and settled himself down for the night.

The harsh laughter of kookaburras, and the mellow, musical carolling of magpies awakened him, shortly after dawn. John took his billy and went straight to the river. There was a sluggish cat-fish of medium size on the lower of the two hooks, and neither bait nor fish on the other. After re-baiting the line and casting it out again, John cleaned the cat-fish, carefully avoiding the poisonous fangs hidden by the side and dorsal fins. He made a fire and breakfasted on grilled fish, hot tea and some damper and delicacies from his pack. Then, after checking the position of his horse, he went back to the pool. Both baits gone again—this was promising. He took another cast and held the line, but the almost imperceptible tugs were not an indication of cod. These were bony bream—quite an edible fish but so small in mouth that hooking them was almost impossible. John moved down to the western end of the pool, where there was not such a depth of water, and where occasional weeds grew up from the bed of the stream. A backwater, this, when the river was running, and a likely spot in the early morning. The line struck the water and settled. The tiny wavelets from the splash ringed out in ever-widening circles and subsided. The line moved gently, almost imperceptibly, but this was no swift, darning nibble of a small-mouthed fish. Again the movement towards deep water—weight in it now, and more definite. John was alert, arm extended, allowing the line to pass gently through his fingers, his whole body tense. And then he struck—a long, upward curving movement of his arm, and the line raced through his fingers, burning and searing as the huge fish headed for the deep water and the imagined safety which it provided. John let it go, placing only sufficient strain upon the line to impart some measure of exhaustion to the fish before it reached its lair. He would lose it only if it attained the logs and tree roots further upstream, or if the line slackened to enable it to shake the hook from its mouth. The fish was getting perilously close to protection now, and John applied more pressure. For a moment he thought the line would snap, or that the hook would tear apart the flesh of the creature's

mouth, the strain was so intense. But the fish turned, and to maintain the tension the line had to be coiled in swiftly. Then another run, not so fast this time, but perhaps more dogged. Again John turned the fish, and he felt it weakening. Keeping the line taut, and allowing the runs, now sluggish and of short duration, John moved back to the beach. The battle was over. He gasped in admiration at the beautiful creature which he drew up on to the sand. The great jaws were open, the gills extended, the huge spotted body quivering and glistening in the sun. A king in its own element, the huge cod was helpless now. John wrapped his kerchief around his hand and lifted the fish by its great gill. He was so immersed in appraising it, and in self-congratulation, that the approach of horses from the other side of Yellow Creek did not disturb him.

'Fifty pounds if he's an ounce. Ain't he a beauty, Mollie?' John swung around, the fish still held, its tail dangling to the ground. He had recognized the deep, gruff voice.

Algernon Bernard Ogilvie was one of Alexander Wade's boundary riders. Except that he was known as 'Abo', the Kane family knew little of this bushman. He had come to the Golden Valley with Wade. Whether he was a ticket-of-leave man or a free settler was not known. He was reputed to be a good horseman and bushman, and to have an extraordinary knowledge of cattle. Although rough, uncouth and belligerent, he was extremely loyal to Wade, and he loved his work.

He was seated on a huge black stallion and his lean, leathery face bore a most ferocious expression. The fringes of his great, sandy moustache were twitching like the bristles around the neck of a frill-lizard as his protruding eyes roved from the fish in John's hand to the young man's face.

The girl beside him sat, male fashion, upon a rangy chestnut colt. She was dressed for riding, but her garb was faded and patched. Hatless, her black hair was windswept and her face flushed after the exertion and exhilaration of an early-morning gallop. As she looked at John her soft, brown eyes contained a glint of mischief.

'Mornin', young feller,' said Abo. 'Where's Cal? What the hell you doin' fishin' over here?'

John placed his fish carefully on the sand.

'Martin went on to Sydney to try for a better price for our hides,' he said, 'and I'm fishing here because I like fishing here. Good morning, Miss Wade.'

Before the girl could speak, Abo shouted, 'If Cal's gone to Sydney to sell hides he's a b—— fool. Sorry, Mollie. Yes, he's a b—— fool; and you're another, young feller, to let him go. I been sellin' hides for more'n forty-five years and I know what I'm talkin' about. Yes, Cal's a b—— fool. Sorry, Mollie. See you've got your billy and a bit of tucker with you. You might ask us if we got throats.'

'I've had my breakfast,' said John, 'but if Miss Wade feels like a cup of tea, I can soon knock one up. The fire should be still alight.'

'I'd love one,' said Mollie, 'but do you usually offer cups of tea to the members of the Wade family?'

John bit his lip as the colour rushed to his face. He hated this simmering hostility. Surely in this distant outpost two families, divided by miles of country, should be able to live in some degree of harmony. He believed that it could be so, but a quip like this, from a slip of a girl, angered him. He ignored the remark, turned his back, climbed the bank and proceeded to rebuild the fire. The others tethered their horses and joined him.

Over the morning tea the conversation turned to fish. Mollie was sure that John's catch was the big cod which she and her sister Nance had seen swimming in the pool some weeks previously. Abo disagreed. He'd seen dozens of 'em, all bigger than the fish now motionless on the beach. Biggest fluke in the world to hook a fish like that. Cod get wise as they get older. No skill in catching a big one. Just a plain b—— fluke.

John offered the fish to Mollie. He would catch another before he went home. He knew a trick or two about fishing for cod. Abo snorted, and picked up the tea things to wash them in the river.

'I been fishin' for cod for forty-five years,' he said, 'and you don't know nuthin' about 'em, young feller.'

John smiled. Abo could never really anger him. Mollie looked at the fish.



'He really is a beauty, Mr. Kane,' she said, 'and I'd love to have him; but the folks back home would want to know how I came by him. And what could I say?'

Again anger flushed in John's face and Mollie saw it.

'Oh, Mr. Kane,' she said, 'I am really grateful for your offer, but it would be much better for you to take the fish yourself.' She changed the subject. 'Have you seen any natives since you came down here?'

John had not. Neither did he think the blacks frequented this part of the river. They did most of their hunting and fishing up in the Moonbis. But Mollie told him that he was wrong. The natives had been hunting extensively over the river flats of late. Naturally game would be scarce in the high country, because of the drought.

'Haven't you seen their bird net, Mr. Kane?' she asked. 'It's down the river a little way from here. Come and I'll show it to you. Abo,' she called to the stockman, 'I'm taking Mr. Kane down to show him the natives' bird net. You can water the horses and let them graze for a while. We won't be long.'

Abo muttered something about women interfering in the affairs of blackfellows, 'and whitefellows too,' he grunted as he watched the two cross the bed of Yellow Creek, and enter the timber on the other side.

'Poor Abo,' said Mollie. 'He likes to think he knows everything about—well, about everything. Dad always says that Abo knows more than two snakes, whatever that means. But he's really a darling. I just love to boss him about.'

'He'd be a handy man if you were ever in danger or trouble,' said John, 'and I think he would be very loyal.'

'He talks a lot, and brags too, Mr. Kane. But he is really very capable. You should see him handle a fractious horse. And he's brave, too. I remember one time Dad yarded a big scrub bull for some purpose, and it attacked him. Abo jumped into the yard and beat the animal off with his hands and a small piece of stick. Mind you, I think the bull would have run away anyhow, Abo looked so fierce.'

'Was your Dad hurt?' asked John.

'He had a couple of ribs broken . . . Look, Mr. Kane, over there, on the bank of the river. It's a blackfellow, and he's seen us. They must be working the net. We had better not go any further.'

The blackfellow was standing beneath a tall gum tree on the river bank about three hundred yards away. He had heard the two young people approaching, but after one quick glance in their direction, he took no further notice of them. He seemed to be watching the bed of the river, and he was obviously holding something attached to a limb of the tree.

'They're working the net all right,' Mollie whispered. 'I'd love to watch them. But if we go any closer they might be angry.'

'Have you seen them do it?' asked John.

'No, but Martin has. In fact he's often helped them at it. You know Martin's almost a native himself. He speaks their language, and I really believe he lives with them sometimes.'

They sat down in the shade of a tree, Mollie anxious to go further but not daring, John a little self-conscious, for to be alone with a female companion was a new experience for him. Sensing this, and wishing to put him more at ease, Mollie kept up a whispered monologue. She explained the action which was now taking place in the river, as Martin O'Callaghan had described it to her. The blacks had a huge net—made from reeds and bark fibre—the mesh closely resembling the white man's fishing net. This contrivance was suspended from two trees, one on either side of a long water-hole in the river. It was set in between the steep banks of the stream, and it hung down to within a few feet of the surface of the water. The natives would approach the net from up- and downstream, scaring ducks and other water fowl, and causing them to fly towards the net. As soon as a bird in flight struck the net the blackfellow on the bank, who was holding the controlling cord extending down from the limb of the tree, would release this cord, and the bird would become entangled in the mesh and be forced into the water. The blacks would then dive into the stream and recover it. Sometimes a great number of birds were trapped at the one time.

As they watched, a flight of teal ducks came up, flying low from downstream. Mollie and John could see the native on the bank tense himself, then release the net. There was no clamour or shouting, but obviously a catch had been made. They could not see what was happening in the river but, after a short wait, the blackfellow pulled the net up again a few moments before more ducks appeared, this time from upstream, and again the net was lowered. Mollie turned to John.

'We had better go back, Mr. Kane,' she said. 'Abo'll be getting anxious.'

As they turned to go John halted his companion.

'The blackfellow is beckoning to us,' he said. 'You wait here, Miss Wade, and I'll go and see what he wants.'

The aboriginal met John half-way. He was a young man, tall, long-limbed and of a lithe and athletic appearance. His hair was black, and matted with gum. He strode forward, a broad smile on his dusky face. There were raised weals on his arms and torso, and one tooth was missing from an otherwise perfect front set. He had no weapons, but he held a pair of sleek teal ducks in his right hand. With his left he patted the dead birds. Then, pointing to Mollie, he said, '*Inargung*,' smiled again, and handed the ducks to John. John took the birds from him and the native turned and ran with long, loping strides back to the river, where he disappeared over the bank.

John went back to where the girl was waiting for him.

'These are for you, Miss Wade,' he said. 'The blackfellow said "*inargung*" as he gave them to me. That means "girl". The natives are probably watching us, so you had better take them now and carry them for a while.'

'What lovely, fat birds,' said Mollie, as she took them from him. 'I can explain at home how I got these, can't I?'

John bit his lip. He believed that she took a delight in tormenting him about the family feud.

For a while they walked in silence. Then John offered to carry the ducks for her. She gave them to him and thanked him.

'Mr. Kane,' she said, 'tell me truthfully, what has happened to Martin O'Callaghan? Why did he go to Sydney? Was it about the wedding? When I tell my sister that I met you—and

I will tell her—she'll want a more convincing story about Martin's absence than the one you gave to Abo.'

John told her frankly all that he knew and the girl was satisfied, but still somewhat mystified.

'He and my sister are going to be married next year,' she said. 'I'll bet that's got something to do with it.'

When they reached the camp she thanked John graciously for his hospitality, and again for his offer of the fish. She hoped that they two would meet again on friendly terms, and warned him not to let any of his father's cattle stray across Yellow Creek. Then she joined the patient Abo. John helped her to mount and, with a parting wave, she and her companion rode off southward towards the Wade homestead.

John sat awhile brooding. What sort of a game was O'Callaghan playing? Strange though the sudden decision to go to Sydney had seemed at the time, he had not questioned the Irishman's action. Did Mollie Wade believe that O'Callaghan had left the Golden Valley? Did John himself believe it? No, Martin would return in due course, and everything would be explained. Mollie was an attractive girl. Aggravating but smart—and pretty too, with all her wild appearance. And gosh, she could handle a horse. What colour were her eyes, black or brown? Brown, he thought, and full of twinkles. Her hair was black, of that he was sure. John didn't think he would do any more fishing. If he packed up now, it would be dark by the time he reached home. So he scaled and cleaned the fish, packed his gear, caught his horse and commenced his long return journey.

## CHAPTER III

### MARTIN O'CALLAGHAN—IRISH REBEL

THE sun hung low over the Great Dividing Range as the little schooner weighed anchor and stood out from Port Stephens. The stiff north-easter bellied her sails, and whipped wisps of

white spray from her bows. On her deck, Martin O'Callaghan leaned against the rail, and gazed reflectively towards the shore. He was thinking of Thomas James Hardy, local manager of the Colonial Pastoral Company, a man whom O'Callaghan did not like. Hardy was an office worker, an accountant by profession, but to carry out the duties of his position successfully he had also to be something of a bushman. O'Callaghan felt that the two could not mix.

The two men had met on quite friendly terms, to all outward appearances. Hardy had spoken of the weather in a casual way, and had greatly deprecated the influence of the coastal conditions upon his Company's sheep. Foot rot was rife, and taking a heavy toll. In fact, because of this, it was quite conceivable that shortly, the Company would make a move inland to the north.

'There is some good land around Warrah, you know, Mr. O'Callaghan, and I have written to the directors advising a move across there. The drier country should be more suitable for sheep, and it is the Company's intention to experiment in the cultivation of wheat.'

'You will never grow much wheat at Warrah,' O'Callaghan had replied.

'Oh, well, there is always the chance of better country further north, you know.'

There had seemed to be a trace of a sneer in Hardy's voice. Then, as the full significance of the manager's words had come home to him, O'Callaghan's hot Irish blood had risen, and giving Hardy a vivid account of himself and his ancestors, and vowing that he would throw his hides into the sea rather than deal with a team of 'land sharks', he had taken them down to the schooner. At that time, he had not had any intention of going to Sydney, but on cooling down the thought had occurred to him that he should try to obtain an interview with the Governor. Perhaps his own future and that of his friends would depend upon it. But he had decided not to alarm the squatters in the Golden Valley, so he had thrown John Kane off the scent. Yes, he reflected, he would see Bourke and request some form of title to the Golden Valley for himself and his colleagues. They had been there eleven years. They had pioneered the place. They

had built their homesteads, and had established friendly relations with the natives. They were the rightful owners of the land. But O'Callaghan's slight knowledge of land laws told him that neither he, Alex Wade, nor Joe Kane had any legal claim whatsoever to ownership.

O'Callaghan came of fighting stock, though, and he was determined that if the Colonial Pastoral Company wished to move in on the Golden Valley—which, he mused, might still be merely supposition—its officers would find in him a force with which to contend. Major Mitchell, when passing through the Golden Valley on his trip to Moreton Bay, had spoken highly of Governor Bourke. O'Callaghan was sure that the Governor would do something for the squatters.

O'Callaghan left the rail and joined Tomlins in a frugal meal. He had a yarn with the genial old skipper, while he smoked a pipe of tobacco, and then retired to a bunk in the tiny cabin.

As the first streaks of dawn filtered through the little porthole, O'Callaghan awoke and slipped out on to the deck. Tomlins was asleep and his mate was at the wheel. The great, black promontory of North Head loomed up to starboard. O'Callaghan marvelled at the over-night speed of the little *Southern Pride*. However, the wind, which had veered a little to the west, was now against the ship, and it was a slow and arduous journey up the beautiful harbour of Port Jackson. It was nine o'clock when they rounded the prison island of Fort Denison, and anchored in Sydney Cove.

Immediately the ship came to rest, O'Callaghan gave Tomlins instructions with regard to the sale of the hides, and rowed ashore in the dinghy.

It was a glorious morning. The blue waters of the harbour, glittering in the brilliant sunshine, sent their tiny wavelets, foam-flecked, to the green-grassed shore. O'Callaghan climbed the grassy slopes of the Domain, and approached the stone palisade surrounding Government House. He was explaining the urgency of his business to the two soldiers on guard at the gate when a fresh-complexioned, clean-shaven man, of medium height and middle age, accompanied by a tall, soldierly-looking individual, stepped up to him within the enclosure. The

guards straightened up and saluted. Major-General Sir Richard Bourke eyed O'Callaghan's fine figure and noble bearing with approval.

'Who is this, Perkins?' he asked, addressing the foremost of the guards. 'A visitor for me?'

'Mr. O'Callaghan, Your Excellency, a squatter from the Golden Valley, or some such place, wishes to interview you with regard to some land question or other. I told him that your secretary——'

'The Golden Valley,' interrupted Bourke, as if trying to recall something to memory. 'Oh, yes, you will admit Mr. O'Callaghan in one hour's time. I am sorry, Mr. O'Callaghan, but I have to attend a meeting of the Council. You can occupy the time?'

'Thank you, Your Excellency,' replied O'Callaghan. 'I'll take a walk around the town.'

Congratulating himself upon his luck in so easily obtaining an interview, the Irishman filled his pipe and strolled across the Domain. Past the old Rum hospital, he took a turn to the right, and wandered down towards the Haymarket. Gangs of convicts were moulding bricks and digging in the Government quarries near the head of the Tank Stream. O'Callaghan crossed the stream and reached the Haymarket. Here a number of bullock waggons were drawn up around a large open square, their tailboards facing inwards, and their contents displayed to the scrutiny of the people. Officers in uniform, smart and arrogant; emancipated convicts, jostling and bustling in the realization of their freedom; prosperous merchants and landholders, their cocked hats set at an imperious angle, the shrewd, silent men of the colony. All vied with one another in bidding for the necessities of life.

The bullockies were mostly big, sun-tanned, dust-bespattered men, and each acted the part of his own auctioneer, calling and extolling the qualities of his produce. This was the commercial centre of the colony where one purchased stock, fodder, wool, grain, fruit, meat—almost everything that money could buy. It was a busy scene indeed, and to O'Callaghan's mind it augured prosperity. He purchased some tobacco from a stall near the

centre of the square, and strolled about the market for a while. Big prices were being paid for most commodities, but live stock, of which there were not many for sale, were in great demand. A small herd of locally bred cattle sold at an average of ten guineas per head, and sheep, with wool on, were bringing anything up to four guineas. Heifers and ewes caused most of the spirited bidding, obviously from settlers desirous of stocking their holdings. O'Callaghan wished the Golden Valley were a little closer, and more accessible. One could turn over money here without much difficulty. He crossed to the lower side of the market, where the old waggon track came in from the west, and walked along this road, known as George Street, back towards the cove.

Here and there imposing stone edifices stood completed, monuments to the ingenuity of the Governors, and the sweat and blood of the convicts.

'Well,' he mused, 'there has been some progress here during the last eleven years.'

Here and there, gangs were at work, under the direction of soldiers, digging out foundations; and on his right, half a dozen prisoners were busy laying blocks of stone to form a pavement. Their warder had his back to O'Callaghan, but something in the width of the man's shoulders and bull neck seemed familiar.

As O'Callaghan passed, one of the convicts straightened his back to survey the stranger, and the curses which poured from the overseer's mouth as he ordered the delinquent back to his task convinced the Irishman of the warder's identity. As the warder swung around to satisfy his own curiosity, his huge, villainous mouth expanded into a horrible grin, displaying a set of broken yellow teeth above a dirty, reddish beard. Surprise registered on his face as he recognized the Irishman.

'Well, begorrah, if it's not me old friend Killarney,' he sneered. 'Is it for to start a rebellion ye've come back, or are ye just bein' afther swankin' yer squatter's airs around the town?'

O'Callaghan paused.

'Neither, Ruskin,' he said. 'I notice you've come up in the world since I saw you last. You've given up murder, and taken to torture as a more profitable profession, I suppose.'



Ruskin had been convicted of complicity in a murder and blackmail case in Liverpool, and had been sent to the colony in the same shipment as O'Callaghan. O'Callaghan could never fathom how the man had escaped the gallows. The Irishman's clean and healthy nature had revolted against Ruskin's natural vileness, and their lives together, during the six months' voyage in the convict ship, had confirmed his loathing and Ruskin's hatred. On one occasion they had come to blows, from which the Irish lad had emerged victorious, but both had received official punishment. Ruskin had sworn a horrible vengeance. Shortly after landing in Sydney Ruskin had been taken to Port Arthur, in Van Dieman's Land, and O'Callaghan had not seen him since.

Ignoring O'Callaghan's remark, Ruskin vented his anger upon the back of the nearest convict. O'Callaghan, disgusted, turned and walked on.

For a while he continued along George Street, then, angling to his right, crossed the wooden bridge over the Tank Stream and walked back, through the Domain, to the Governor's residence. The guard directed him along a sanded path between flowering rose bushes to the door of the famous house, whence a liveried aide conducted him to the library.

Governor Bourke sat in a large, comfortable chair before a paper-strewn table. This was his private sanctuary and he had given instructions for his visitor to be brought to him here. He motioned O'Callaghan to be seated, dismissed the attendant, and, with characteristic abruptness, plunged into business.

'To what circumstances am I indebted for this visit, Mr. O'Callaghan?' he asked.

'To the fact that my friends and I fear we are in danger of being deprived of our livelihoods, Your Excellency,' replied O'Callaghan, boldly returning the Governor's direct scrutiny.

'Kindly be more explicit, sir.'

'Certainly. I will explain in detail. Some years ago, Mr. Joseph Kane, a Cornishman by birth who had obtained a small grant of land at Parramatta, sold his property and took his family, some horses, some stud cattle and a few sheep to Port Stephens. Mr. Kane had been on very friendly terms with

Mr. Oxley, the Surveyor-General, and from him had obtained information concerning a tract of fertile country lying about a hundred and fifty miles north-west of Port Stephens. Certain directions which Mr. Oxley had given him enabled Mr. Kane to reach the Golden Valley. I accompanied him. Three years later, Alexander Wade battled his way up from the Hawkesbury valley. Kane, Wade and myself are occupying all the good grazing land in this locality, and despite droughts and other setbacks, we are prospering. We have erected houses and stock-yards and are making what modest improvements we can. We realize that we have no title to the land and that, as the country advances, unscrupulous people may endeavour to supplant us and reap the reward of our labours. To be candid, Your Excellency, I have come to ask if you could possibly give us legal titles.'

Bourke, who had listened attentively, leaned back in his chair.

'Mr. O'Callaghan,' he said, 'you speak like a barrister. What was your occupation before you adopted cattle raising?'

'Stone-breaking, Your Excellency,' replied O'Callaghan with a smile.

Bourke regarded him incredulously for a moment, then said: 'Ah, I have it. An Irish rebel. You had a good education at home, I presume?'

'Yes.'

'Were you a lawyer?'

'No,' replied O'Callaghan. 'I read for the Bar in Dublin but I gave it up.'

'What a pity.' Then, after a moment or two: 'Well, sir,' said the Governor, 'your arrival is most opportune. About ten years ago a land syndicate, under the name of the Colonial Pastoral Company, obtained a grant from the Imperial Government of a million acres of land at any place within the Colony to which title had not already been given. The Company's resources were limited, so its people accepted half of that area at Port Stephens and extending down to the Coal River, or Hunter, as it is known; the other half to be taken up when the Company had progressed sufficiently to occupy it. A week ago I received a letter from the Company's manager at Port Stephens,

a Mr. Hardy—doubtless you know him—asking me to sign a document giving him authority to exercise his Imperial grant to obtain the whole of Oxley's Golden Valley for his Company, and he specified that the land would be occupied immediately—don't interrupt me, sir; allow me to finish. I refused. Major Mitchell, who was here at the time, told me that there were squatters already established in that locality, and he gave me your names. I was rather sceptical, and although Mitchell showed me an entry in his diary, stating that he had spent a few days with you about two years ago, I considered it a possibility that an error might have been made in the location of that remote country. Consequently, it was my intention to send Mitchell up on his return from Bathurst next week, to take Mr. Hardy across there and make sure that your district and his were identical. Perhaps you can save me the trouble and the Government some expense. Are you well acquainted with the formation of the country?

'Perfectly, Your Excellency, for I have ridden over almost every foot of it.'

'Then, could you draw me a rough sketch of the river valleys, mountains, etc.? Here are ink and paper. Give me an idea of the location of your holdings in relation to Port Stephens, and the track which you are accustomed to follow. I have Oxley's maps here and I can compare them.'

O'Callaghan made a quick sketch and handed it to the Governor.

'I believe the maps are identical,' said Bourke after studying them closely. 'There is no doubt that you and your friends are settled in Oxley's Golden Valley. You're squatting upon the land which Hardy's Company requires.'

O'Callaghan grew restless.

'Take it easy, man,' said the Governor. 'I have more to tell you. You may smoke if you wish.'

O'Callaghan filled his pipe and Bourke continued:

'The question of land settlement and titles, in this colony, is a very complicated one. Suffice it to say that for many years now, it has been the policy of the Administration in New South Wales to issue grants to free settlers and emancipists, giving them

titles to living areas of land. To keep order, we have restricted these grants to areas within easy access of settled districts. But there are always to be found contrary people, like yourself and your friends, who will persist in settling themselves in unheard-of places in the interior. They have neither right nor title, and, legally, they are trespassers on His Majesty's property——'

'But, Your Excellency——'

'One moment, sir; I know what you would say. Provided that these people conduct themselves in a proper manner I am prepared to overlook this. I fully realize the enormous amount of good which people like yourselves are doing in opening up the country, and if I could, I would have titles executed. But you understand my position: There are hundreds of such people, north, south and west, all beyond the boundaries of location. To find them, and survey their holdings, would entail an expense which this colony could not possibly afford. At the time when you and your friends left Sydney—in Governor Brisbane's time, I think—in addition to permitting grants of land to be made from here, it was the policy of the Home Government to give title to land in New South Wales to free emigrants who had a certain amount of capital. This policy was designed to assist the development of the colony. The Administration here supplied such settlers with rations for a maximum period of six months, and advanced them a limited number of cattle from the Government herds. Naturally, there were to be found unscrupulous men who were prepared to take unfair advantage of this system. The authorities at home had only a theoretical knowledge of conditions here, and the authorities here had no means of screening the emigrants selected. People were found selling lands received by way of grant before they had even seen the country. In Governor Darling's time these abuses were reduced somewhat, by the creation of the local Land Board and by a change of policy whereby, unless a person could show that he was both willing and able personally to work and develop a holding, he could not obtain title. •

'But about four years ago—and this, Mr. O'Callaghan, is what concerns you greatly—a completely new method of secur-

ing title to land in the colony was instituted under instructions from the Home Government. The administration here is no longer authorized to grant land to anyone except for schools, churches and other public purposes. Land now has to be sold at public auction, and the minimum price is five shillings per acre. Have you and your friends sufficient capital to buy on that basis?'

'I think so, Your Excellency. Certainly we could not purchase the huge areas which we are occupying at present. But we could buy goodly tracts now, and the rest later.'

'Very good,' said Bourke. 'But once your position has been established you will be entitled to the rights of citizens, and I will be responsible for you. You understand what that responsibility will mean? I am not the man to shirk it, but people like you are so remote and scattered that I cannot conscientiously accept it. And as I pointed out to you earlier, the money and manpower required to survey all those distant holdings is beyond the resources of the Government at present. I cannot create a precedent until I am in a position to treat all alike. Therefore, I am desirous of leaving you to yourselves until such time as the colony extends and envelops you. Then you will be given the opportunity of securing titles. Shortly, I intend to make representation to the Home Government, asking its sanction and financial assistance to divide the colony into several defined sections. When that has been done, and administration decentralized a little, all of you squatters will be brought gradually within the pale of jurisdiction. But until then, or failing that, until the colony extends, I am afraid you will have to remain a law unto yourselves.'

'Then I am to assume, Your Excellency, that you can afford us no protection.'

'You are to assume nothing of the sort, young man. I have already told you that I have refused to sanction the Colonial Pastoral Company's grant as far as it applies to your locality. And, in terms of the Company's charter, the sanction of the Governor of New South Wales is necessary before the Imperial grant can become operative. What further protection do you require?'

'I am just a little afraid that the Company, which I know to have powerful influences at home, might bring pressure to bear on the British Government, and you might be ordered to give your sanction.'

Bourke smiled.

'I am a loyal and dutiful servant of King William, Mr. O'Callaghan,' he said, 'but if you were in my position, and received some of the ridiculous instructions that are issued in the name of His Majesty for the welfare of this colony, you would be surprised. No, sir, you have no cause to be alarmed. This is the first instance in which the Home Government has given a grant covering such a wide scope and I have been rather at a loss how to act. However, now that you have given me positive proof of your occupation of the territory, I will write to the Secretary of State explaining the position, and I will stress the point that, under the present circumstances, I cannot possibly sanction a grant of the Golden Valley lands to the Colonial Pastoral Company. As I said, eventually I will be in a position to have proper surveys made of your locality. As the law stands now, it will be necessary for you and your friends to apply to me for purchase of your holdings from the Crown, and your intentions to bid for them must be notified in the Government Gazette for three months before the day of sale. But I beg of you not to make such application at present. Let things remain as they are until the Colony has developed a little further. In the meantime, I cannot see that you have any cause for concern. Are you satisfied?'

'Perfectly, Your Excellency, and I am most grateful for the interest which you have taken and for the time which you have given me.'

'Good. Now there is one thing more, sir, before you depart. According to Oxley's maps, the Golden Valley itself does not include more than about three hundred thousand acres. In addition to its present occupation the Colonial Pastoral Company is entitled to another five hundred thousand. The Company wishes to locate the other two hundred thousand acres south from your valley, and including the district known amongst the aborigines as "Warrah". Although that section

is well away from all authorized settlement I decided that, as the land was unoccupied, I would allow the grant to take effect, and the onus will be on the Imperial Government. I explained this to Mr. Hardy in my letter. The Company may occupy Warrah on the distinct understanding that there is no encroachment over the range to the north of that area. So you will have neighbours in the near future.'

'Hardy told me that the Company was contemplating a move to Warrah, Your Excellency,' said O'Callaghan.

The Governor eyed him searchingly.

'You have seen Hardy and, in consequence, you decided to see me. I compliment you on your loyalty to your friends. You told me you had studied law at home. Where did you get your knowledge of farming?'

'My father was a farmer in the old country,' replied O'Callaghan. 'After his death, I carried on the place for a while—long enough to obtain a pretty good working knowledge of stock and soil cultivation.'

'Are you and your friends engaged in cultivation?' asked Bourke.

'Only a little for our own domestic purposes. We grow a few potatoes and other vegetables and a little corn. There is ample natural herbage in the valley for stock feed, and even in the driest season, the river flats provide good grazing.'

The Governor was interested.

'You know,' he said, 'this colony has imported a lot of food in the half-century of its existence. Land around Sydney and the Hawkesbury is not as fertile as it might be. The Coal River country is excellent for cultivation, but of course, is not unlimited, and it is subject to severe flooding. West of the Blue Mountains there is good grazing land, but I am not too sure about agriculture, although I am having that aspect of the country examined in the near future. I may be looking a long way ahead, but would you say the Golden Valley could produce grain?'

O'Callaghan considered for a moment. 'I can say with certainty, Your Excellency, that given ample water, the Golden Valley will produce anything. The valley contains thousands

of acres of deep and rich alluvial soil of basalt origin. And the water is there, particularly in time of flood. There must be many more districts like it in this country. If peasant farming could be introduced, and if roads could be made and adequate shipping provided, this colony could feed the world.'

'You are an enthusiast, I am afraid, Mr. O'Callaghan,' said Bourke. 'But it is refreshing and encouraging to hear an experienced man speak like that. I can assure you, however, that it will be a long time before peasant farmers will be looking towards your Golden Valley. Well, Mr. O'Callaghan, you need have no anxiety about Mr. Hardy and his friends. The Company might try to buy you out, but that is your concern. I wish you every success; you deserve it. I have enjoyed this conversation with you immensely but I have urgent business to attend and you must excuse me. Good-bye, sir.'

'Good-bye, Your Excellency, and thank you a thousand times.'

'You are welcome, lad.'

Bourke shook hands with him.

'A few hundred men of that calibre and this colony would become a nation overnight,' he thought, as O'Callaghan's huge form filled the doorway.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE CORROBOREE

TOMLINS was anxious to take the *Southern Pride* out of port whilst the wind was still from the west and the tide running out. Therefore he had requested his passenger to be on board at least an hour before sunset because, as he said, 'these westerlies usually drop with the setting sun'. So O'Callaghan had the afternoon at his disposal. He recollected that, before he had gone to the north, there was a very clean public-house in Castlereagh Street at the corner of King Street. The establish-



ment was known as the 'Cherry Tree'. O'Callaghan wondered if it were still licensed. If so, he would welcome a meal there, so he walked across the park lands to the south of Government House, down Hunter Street to Castlereagh Street, and found the sign of the 'Cherry Tree' at the King Street intersection. The house had been painted and renovated recently, and it was expertly controlled by its genial proprietor, Mr. Hugh Murray.

O'Callaghan had a good meal whilst he scanned some of the publications now being produced in the colony. He was interested in the *Sydney Times*, conducted by Mr. Kentish, but the first edition of *The Colonist* was on the table and this paper held his fancy. O'Callaghan had met Dr. John Dunmore Lang on one occasion at Kane's house at Parramatta, and he had been impressed greatly with the man's personality and his frank and original views on current subjects. Now this forthright Presbyterian minister had established a newspaper, and its policy, O'Callaghan read, was to provide 'a general diffusion of useful knowledge and inculcation of right principles in regard to means of promoting the moral welfare and the general advancement of the colony'.

O'Callaghan was reading further when Hugh Murray came into the dining-room. The two men had already exchanged greetings.

'What do you think of our new paper, Cal?' asked Murray.

'I like its policy,' said O'Callaghan, 'and I like its proprietor. I should think the publication will do a lot of good. If my opinion of Lang is correct there won't be any reservation about him where principles are concerned.'

'You're right there, Cal,' said Murray. 'I've got a copy of the second issue somewhere. I'll dig it up for you to take home. He gives the Home Government a pasting on the management of emigration. He claims that John Marshall, the emigration agent in London, has been scavenging the Port of London and pouring the lowest type of migrant into New South Wales in order to make a profit for himself. You know they're using the monies obtained from sales of Crown lands here to bring out migrants. Lang wants married couples to be selected, and he

also wants the Government here to develop a properly organized system of completely free immigration.'

'There's no doubt that he's a fearless character,' said O'Callaghan. 'But somebody's sure to catch him for libel, unfortunately. Do you know an overseer of convicts named Ruskin?'

Hugh Murray had heard of Ruskin, but knew nothing of his history. Since his contact with the big ex-convict earlier in the day, O'Callaghan could not get the fellow out of his mind.

'Nicholas Devine would have been the man to give you information about that fellow, Cal,' said Murray. 'The old fellow had a working knowledge of every convict of note in the colony.'

'Nick Devine,' mused O'Callaghan. 'But he must be dead by now, surely. He was an old man when I left Sydney.'

'He died about four year ago, at a hundred and four years of age, it was rumoured. Bernard Rochford looked after the old man's property in the latter stages of his life. The old chap was very feeble. Did you know Rochford?'

'Only casually.'

'Well, Rochford would have known this chap Ruskin. Rochford is living in Devine's house now. Why not take a run out and have a yarn with him? You know Devine's place, don't you?'

'Yes, out on the flats below the New Town. I was out there once. There were some enormous trees on the property, and plenty of kangaroos. Devine had two hundred odd acres, if I remember rightly. It was good land, too. Did he will it to Rochford?'

'I don't really know, Cal. I did hear that Nicholas gave Rochford a power of attorney before the old man became senile and that Rochford has sold a lot of the land. On the whole it is pretty good country, although some of it's a bit swampy. Devine never really did anything with it. I think it was Grose who granted him most of it back in '94 as a reward for his work as Superintendent of Convicts. Would you like to go out and have a yarn with Rochford? I can lend you a horse.'

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'No thanks, Hugh. I don't really know him very well. If Devine were alive I should certainly make the effort. He was a fine old character. But I have to be back on board before sundown, so I'd be cutting it fine for time. As far as Ruskin is concerned my interest, I'm afraid, is more idle curiosity than anything else. I knew him in my own convict days, and was convinced that the man was an unmitigated scoundrel, and I had hoped that I had seen the last of him. I am simply curious to know how he became an overseer. But enough of Ruskin. How are you prospering here, Hugh?'

'Tolerably well, Cal. I have a good establishment with a good name, and although I am not making as much money as some of my rather unsavoury contemporaries in the town, I can hold up my head and I am content.'

'What do you think of Governor Bourke?'

'He's doing a remarkably good job, Cal. Mind you he's not as popular as Darling was, or Brisbane for that matter. Bourke's a soldier, with a soldier's mind. He's most forthright. He hasn't the land-grant system to buy friends with, and from what I have seen of his actions, he wouldn't use it if he had. His honesty of purpose and his straightforward methods make a lot of enemies for him in a place like this. But that doesn't worry Bourke. Have you seen him?'

'Yes. I had a discussion with him this morning on legal matters concerning my holding up north. You have confirmed the opinion which I formed of him. He's holding down a big job here and doing credit to it. It takes a big-hearted man to do that. What's the population of the colony now, Hugh?'

'About sixty-one thousand, I believe, and growing rapidly.'

'It's almost doubled since I left Sydney, then,' said O'Callaghan. 'When we were at Parramatta they used to say that there were thirty-three thousand people in New South Wales.'

For a time O'Callaghan and his friend went on discussing the colony and its notables. Murray asked many questions about the Golden Valley, the Coal River settlement, Port Macquarie and Port Stephens, and O'Callaghan satisfied his curiosity as far as he was able. Murray told his friend something of the activities of William Wentworth. For the first time

O'Callaghan learned of Sturt's discoveries of the Darling and the Murray. The Irishman had heard a little from Major Mitchell of the exploratory work of the colony, but Hugh Murray, like most tavern-keepers, was a mine of detailed information and O'Callaghan a most attentive listener. And so the afternoon passed rapidly away.

O'Callaghan wished to purchase some small presents for the Golden Valley people before he left town, but as his visit had been impromptu, he had very little money with him. Hugh Murray gave him an advance and loaded him with newspapers, Government Gazettes and English periodicals to take home. As O'Callaghan was leaving the 'Cherry Tree', Murray called to an assigned convict servant who was working in the yard of the tavern. He asked the man if he knew anything of an overseer of convicts named Ruskin. The convict had no knowledge of Ruskin's return from Port Arthur, but he related the story of his promotion. It appeared that a few years previously Ruskin had been working with a gang of fellow convicts near the public wharf on the western side of Sydney Cove when a prominent official slipped on some wet planking and fell into the deep water. The man could not swim and was in danger of drowning or being taken by sharks when Ruskin plunged in, fully clothed, and rescued him. For this action Ruskin received a pardon and his position of authority followed later.

'He's cruel and ruthless,' said the convict, 'and most of the men hate him, but he's brave.'

'Yes,' thought O'Callaghan, 'brave as a lion where he can see an advantage to himself.'

Aloud he said nothing but took his leave of Murray.

On his way back to the cove O'Callaghan made some purchases of pipes, perfumery, clothing materials and other articles suitable as presents for the bush people back home. When, loaded and perspiring, he reached the harbour, he could see the *Southern Pride* already out in the stream and he paid a boatman to row him across to her. Tomlins was anxiously awaiting him. O'Callaghan's hides had been sold at a fair price to a skin dealer in the town and cargo for the return voyage had been taken aboard.

As the schooner made its way up the coast the westerly wind subsided and during the night there was a period of almost complete calm followed by a sustained fresh north-easterly. This was a pleasant wind, but bad for a ship sailing north. It meant long tacking, and many extra miles, so that the *Southern Pride* did not reach its destination until the second morning after its evening departure from Port Jackson.

The sun was just rising as O'Callaghan, having reclaimed his horses, rode out through the headquarters of the Colonial Pastoral Company. Smoke issued from the stone chimney-stacks of the slab houses of the settlement.

'Probably considering a move,' thought O'Callaghan as he noted the early activity. Life seemed much better since his discussions with Governor Bourke, but he had resolved on secrecy with regard to this interview. As the Company and the Golden Valley squatters were to become neighbours it would be better for the settlers not to know of the Company's designs upon the valley lands. Their naturally hot tempers and impetuous natures might cause trouble should they learn the true story. Perhaps, though, he might confide in Nance Wade. She would fully understand and would respect his confidence. The thought was a pleasant one. A good prosperous season to atone for the present drought and Nance would be Mrs. O'Callaghan. And they would have children—young Australians to share the wealth and prosperity of the Golden Valley.

The appearance of Hardy at his office doorway brought O'Callaghan back to the present. Hardy waved as the squatter rode by, and O'Callaghan returned the salutation. 'The man's doing the job he's paid to do, and he's doing it well,' he thought. 'With the Governor on our side these people must be content to remain at Warrah, and we should be able to establish and maintain friendly relations.'

Clearing the township the Irishman entered the dense forests of turpentine and gum which stretched away, through gently rising country, to the distant mountains. With an occasional peak on the blue line as his objective, he rode on through the hot summer day, never wavering and never doubting the accuracy of his course. The instincts possessed by the trained

bushman defy analysis. He sets his course and follows it, without map or compass, making wide deviations to avoid obstacles, but ever returning to the line of his proper direction.

O'Callaghan camped that night in rugged country on the bank of a stream which he knew, from its direction, to be a tributary of the Coal River. Despite the mosquitoes, the howling dingoes and his hard bed, he slept soundly. He was accustomed to these hardships and the solid day's riding had fatigued him. Daylight found him once more in the saddle, refreshed from his sleep and a hearty breakfast, and leading his string of pack-horses behind him. Crossing the stream, he swung more towards the north and nightfall found him on another river, the Upper Coal.

On the following afternoon he rode into the heavily timbered foothills which fringed the Great Divide, and from now on his journey became tedious. That night he rested in the cool, bracing air of the Liverpool ranges, and at noon on the following day he descended into the open plains and rolling hills of the Warrah district. Once more he altered his course, this time to due north.

As the fierce sun of the following day sank to rest in a blaze of crimson sky, O'Callaghan unsaddled his horses and picketed them in a tiny, spring-fed valley, high up in the Wallabadah Mountains. The night being mild, he refrained from lighting a fire, but, as he lay on his blanket, his head pillowed on his saddle, the pungent odour of burning gum leaves assailed his nostrils. Suspecting a bushfire, and realizing his danger, he arose and climbed the steep wall of the valley on the windward side. Upon reaching the top he scaled a pile of rock whence he could look down into the next valley. A mile or so to the west, a twinkle of light gleamed through the trees, and O'Callaghan decided to investigate. There were natives in the vicinity—the fire proved that—but whether or not they were hostile, he could not say. To pass the night in the locality without knowing would be foolish. So he returned to his camp, took his long rifle from his pack, looked to the priming and ascended the hill again. Flitting from shadow to shadow and carefully avoiding patches of moonlight, he might himself have been a

native, so stealthily did he approach the fire. After travelling for over a mile in this fashion he ascended a little ridge and saw, not two hundred yards away, a great fire of logs and branches burning fiercely in a small clearing. A few paces nearer to him was a similar pile, as yet untouched by fire. That was all. There were no natives in sight.

O'Callaghan, well versed in the ways of the natives, lay flat upon his stomach in the dark shadow cast by a big tree and waited. Perhaps half an hour had elapsed before the shrill, dismal howl of a dingo pierced the still, night air. It came from somewhere down the valley. As if this were a signal, six old aborigines, naked, filed out of the scrub and sat in a little group at one side of the fire and about twenty paces from it. Each man carried a whitened bone—the shoulder blade of a kangaroo. Their jet-black skins glistening in the firelight—a striking contrast to their grey hair and beards—they formed a grotesque company. When the last man had seated himself the natives broke into a low and monotonous crooning, nodding their heads and beating time the while with their gruesome cymbals. For about five minutes this weird chant continued, then ceased as abruptly as it had begun. One of the blacks leaped to his feet, threw back his head and the harsh laugh of the kookaburra echoed through the valley. It was strange to hear this laugh at night; it seemed as though one of the birds had mistaken the moonlight for the early dawn. As the sound died away the six natives threw themselves flat upon their faces and a shower of spears, which seemed to the watcher to spring from the trees themselves, flew through the air from every direction and embedded themselves in the wood pile by the fire. Then a strange thing happened. A charred log, which O'Callaghan had noticed in the moonlight between him and the clearing, suddenly took shape in the form of a tall and muscular aboriginal. Bending almost double, this dusky figure ran at a surprising speed to the edge of the clearing, and dropped flat on its stomach.

O'Callaghan saw this aboriginal wriggle like a snake through the short grass till he reached the firelight, when again he arose to his feet and raced for the fire. With lightning-like dexterity he snatched a burning brand, threw it on to the pile of wood,

and then flitted back into the shelter of the timber. His action was repeated three times in succession by young blacks who appeared from the other side of the clearing.

O'Callaghan glanced across to where the old natives still lay with their faces to the ground, then back again to the blackened log, now returned to its former position and character. O'Callaghan had caught merely a glimpse of the tall blackfellow as he ran but the Irishman thought that he recognized Bru Bri, the young king of the Moonbi tribe of the Kamilaroi. The whole thing was most mysterious. The chief, if it were he, was miles away from his hunting grounds and from his tribe. The meaning of this strange corroboree was far from clear. But there was more to follow.

As the bush pile burned low the old men sat up, one by one, and resumed their crooning. Then the blackfellow in front of O'Callaghan rose to his feet and strode to the ashes of the pile. O'Callaghan had a clear view of the native this time. It was Bru Bri all right—the rangy legs and arms, the deep chest and muscular torso were unmistakable—but the chief's face and body were horribly marked with yellow clay. For a moment Bru Bri surveyed the smouldering ashes, then, imitating the call of the mopoke, he began to circle the fire. Blacks seemed to appear from everywhere. Coming in ones and twos they fell in behind their leader, until an endless circle—comprised of some fifteen or twenty young men, all painted and daubed in grotesque fashion—ringed in a monotonous tramp around the blazing logs.

O'Callaghan recognized many of these young warriors. They were from the Moonbis. Their painted bodies and the absence of women proved that this was a war corroboree; but the old men did not belong to the Moonbi tribe. It was given to few white men, indeed, to witness a war corroboree and to get away alive, but O'Callaghan, due to his friendly and almost brotherly relations with young Bru Bri, had seen more than one.

Every corroboree had a purpose. It was not merely mystic symbolism, neither was it a religious ceremony. It was the aborigines' method of describing a momentous happening, or something of importance which was to take place. It was



ballet, in the most primitive form; yet in its effectiveness in imprinting lasting impressions upon the native mind, it was ballet, thoroughly and completely developed. When the blacks were about to make war, the corroboree depicted the plan of campaign. Through this medium, the general issued his orders of the day, told his captains what was expected of them and gave his detailed operational orders.

When, on previous occasions, O'Callaghan had seen these ceremonies, he had had no difficulty in reading their messages. But this time, he was completely puzzled. The shower of spears raining upon the bush pile signified an attack; but upon what? Suddenly O'Callaghan had it—a house, of course—and in casting the burning brand Bru Bri had meant that, under cover of a barrage of spears, a dwelling was to be burned over the heads of its occupants. The old men were the sages of the Warrah tribe. Apparently they and the Moonbi people had allied themselves for war, and Bru Bri had brought his warriors across to demonstrate his plan of attack. Then O'Callaghan became alarmed. White people were to be the victims, for the natives had no houses. What was it to be—Loder's place at Cuerindie, or a homestead in the Golden Valley? Loder's was out of the question. It was too far away, and the Moonbi natives would have no interest there. He must see Bru Bri and speak to the chief alone; but how to accomplish this? Bru Bri was squatting before the fire, engaged in low conversation with the old men from Warrah. All the warriors had disappeared, but O'Callaghan knew that they were scattered through the surrounding bush, vigilantly guarding their chief. Any move now and a spear or boomerang might terminate his existence. But his knowledge of the nature and habits of the aborigines found a way out of the difficulty. With the natives, gentleness and sympathy and understanding—except in war—were always manifest in the sight of human or animal suffering. O'Callaghan took a chance. He moaned softly, like a man in extreme agony. There was a slight rustle in the grass behind him and a black shadow flitted across his face. Turning over and looking sideways, he saw the swarthy, clay-smeared features of Biraban, Bru Bri's brother, peering down at him.

'You are sick, Piriwallan,' whispered the native, speaking in the Kamilaroi dialect. 'I will bring you water.'

'No, Biraban,' O'Callaghan said softly, in the same language. 'I have a big message for Bru Bri. Run.'

With a grunt, the young man raced towards the clearing, and a minute or so later Bru Bri arrived alone from a direction away from the clearing and sat down silently before him. O'Callaghan grimly noted the warrior's caution.

'Bru Bri,' he said, sitting up, 'I, Piriwallan, saw your corroboree.'

Bru Bri's face was expressionless.

'You are planning to kill my brothers.'

Still no answer.

'Come, Bru Bri. I saw it all and I read its message. Tell me why you are planning this or by — I'll kill you.' And the squatter leaped to his feet, lapsing into English, of which Bru Bri knew a little.

The young chief drew himself up to his full height, his black eyes blazing like burning coals.

'You rumble like thunder, Piriwallan,' he said quietly, 'but I am not afraid. When the Moonbis glisten with running water the white man kills the kangaroo. The black man laughs, for there are kangaroos in plenty. But when the wattle dies on the mountains, and the grass grows yellow on the plains, and still the white man kills the kangaroo, the black man laughs no more. *Kapirro wirri banbilla*—we are perishing with hunger—and we must fight.'

Why hadn't O'Callaghan thought of this before? Why hadn't it occurred to the others in the Golden Valley? For months now the squatters had been shooting down the marsupials which, driven by drought from the mountainous country, had flocked into the valley and threatened to deprive the cattle of their sustenance. Only the wilder and more cunning animals were escaping, and despite his superior bushcraft, the poor native, with his primitive weapons, could not be expected to succeed where the white man's rifle had failed. Naturally the tribes, robbed of their food and occupation, were hungry and restless. It was to Bru Bri's credit that he had kept his warriors

in check for so long, and had prevented them, as he must have done, from a wholesale slaughter of cattle.

'Bru Bri,' he said, gently, 'why have you not told me of this before? I am Piriwallan, the chief of the White Tribe. I could not see your people hungry.'

'Three times I have been to your gunyah, Piriwallan, and you have not been there. My people told me that you and the young white man from the high country had gone away to the big water. They told me that the young man had come back—alone. I believed that you had gone walk about—that you too were hungry, and would not come back.'

'I am your friend, Bru Bri,' said O'Callaghan, 'and you will not harm me. I am free to go to my white warriors, to arm them with their thunder-sticks, and to send away to the big water for more white men who will come and destroy all the tribes of the Kamilaroi. But my heart is big for the people of the Moonbis, so I will gather my warriors in a great corroboree and will tell them of their sin against the black men. They will repent, and henceforth the kangaroo will be a sacred animal amongst them. While Piriwallan lives, no kangaroo will perish at the white man's hands.'

The young chief raised his eyes to O'Callaghan's face, his savage breast heaving with emotion.

'You are wise, Piriwallan,' he said, 'and you are good. I understand. I will go to my warriors and bid them wash off their war-paint. The men of the Moonbis will return to their hunting-grounds and will remain at peace with the white men.'

After Bru Bri left him, O'Callaghan waited motionless for a time, to give the chief an opportunity to convey his tidings to the scattered warriors. The white man was not afraid of the Moonbi people. For years his kindly understanding had retained their respect and friendship, and because of his dominating personality he had always been known amongst them as 'Piriwallan', the Strong Chief of the White Tribe. But should his presence, too soon, become known to the local Warrah faction, his life might be in danger. He knew that another

gathering would be necessary to explain the changed circumstances, so he remained in the shadows until he heard the familiar call, then walked leisurely back to his camp.

The night was now far advanced. The squatter was extremely tired and suffered some reaction after the tension of the last few hours. So he lost no time in resuming his interrupted rest. He arose at dawn, breakfasted and commenced the last stages of his journey home. Before the sun had attained its full ferocity he reached the top of the Wallabadah Mountains, where he rested to feast his eyes awhile upon the beauties of his beloved Golden Valley.

It was a glorious vista, seen from the top of this mountain range, and whenever he travelled to Port Stephens, and again on his return, he invariably paused here for a while. He saw now the rolling plains bending down to the densely timbered river flats; the well-defined line of the river and, beyond it, the blue and purple Moonbi Mountains. O'Callaghan's heart swelled with pride. He and Joe Kane and Alexander Wade had pioneered this country. It was theirs in fact, and eventually it would be theirs in law. This was home indeed—a free, open-hearted country, abundant in its fertility—a paradise for free, open-hearted men.

Happy and contented, O'Callaghan began the long descent of the northern slopes of the Wallabadahs and came upon Yellow Creek at a point where that stream turns to the north towards the Peel River. Here he saw the still-warm ashes of a native cooking fire, indicating that Bru Bri and his men were somewhere ahead and would probably hunt in the valley before returning to the Moonbis. It was imperative, therefore, that Wade and Kane should be warned of O'Callaghan's understanding with Bru Bri; for any indiscriminate shooting whilst the natives were still in the locality could have serious repercussions. He would go to Wade's first, and then ride across to Kane's, before returning to his own homestead.

## CHAPTER V

### 'BUNKILLA BULA'

WADE's station homestead was built upon an eminence back from the western bank of Yellow Creek, some five or six miles south of the junction of that stream with the Peel River. It was not unlike Joe Kane's place in appearance, being of similar structure, but a little different in design. The station's complement consisted of Alexander Wade, a dour and rather taciturn English farmer, his two daughters, Nance and Mollie, his son William and two boundary riders, Ogilvie and a Swedish ex-sailor named Carl Svortzen.

Alexander Wade, repairing the stock-yard on the southern side of the house, saw O'Callaghan riding down the bank of the creek. At a glance Wade appeared quiet and inoffensive, but he was a man of courage and determination, capable of handling most situations. He stood erect as O'Callaghan approached.

'Well, Cal,' he drawled, 'we wondered if you were ever coming back. Young Kane told Abo that you went down south to sell some hides, but it seemed a tall story to me. You'll have to square off with Nance. She's terrible wild.'

O'Callaghan smiled. 'Kane told Abo the truth as far as he knew it, Alex,' he said. 'I did get an excellent price for those skins, and had a good holiday at the same time. But mainly, I had some urgent personal business to deal with in Sydney which was not apparent when I left home. Before I see Nance I've got something very important to tell you.' Without further preamble O'Callaghan gave Wade an account of his meeting with the blacks.

'Bru Bri and his tribe are back in the valley,' he concluded.

'I saw traces of them less than an hour ago, so you can't be too careful. Where are your men?'

Wade, who had been listening carefully, thought for a moment or so.

'Cal,' he said, 'I'll have to do some quick riding. Bill's down on the river. He didn't take a rifle so he's all right. Svortzen's riding your boundary and he's got no gun with him either. But Abo's up the top of Yellow Creek somewhere. He's got his rifle, and when he left this morning he was swearing that Kanes and the 'roos were going to eat us out of the valley, and he said if he couldn't shoot one he'd make up for it on the other. He's as mad as they make 'em, Cal, and if the blueskins hear him shooting there might be hell to pay.'

'There'll be more than that, Alex,' said O'Callaghan grimly. 'They wouldn't get Abo—he'd be too cunning for that—but if he shoots anything now we could all be in for trouble. From the traces which I saw of them I would say that the natives were working in the direction of the Moonbjs, probably hunting, so Abo is in the least dangerous quarter; but it's best to be on the safe side. Take my advice, Alex, and ride up and see if you can find your foreman. I'll go down to the house and see Nance, then I'll ride over to Kane's and warn them.'

O'Callaghan unsaddled his horse and pack mare, drove them with the rest of his team into the yard and went down to the house, entering the dining-room through the open front door. The room was empty, so he crossed a little trellised passage to the slab kitchen at the back. Nance heard his step and turned to meet him.

'Well, you big truant,' she said, 'where have you been? I saw you telling my father a great yarn down by the stock-yard. Now give an account of yourself.'

Nance was a young woman in her early twenties, taller than her sister Mollie, not so dark and of a more reserved demeanour. Her eyes were more brown than black and even when smiling they carried a hint of sadness. O'Callaghan always felt that there was some unforgotten sorrow reflected there, or a premonition of some tragedy to come. When quite a young child she had seen her mother die. Perhaps that was the explanation.

O'Callaghan kissed her tenderly.

'Martin,' she said, 'I was beginning to think you had run away from the valley, and from me, for ever. Why did you do it? Come out on to the veranda now and make your confession.'

Withholding nothing, O'Callaghan described his adventures. Nance agreed that, apart from informing the other settlers that they were to have the Colonial Pastoral Company as neighbours at Warrah, nothing should be said at this stage about the Company's expansion ambitions. O'Callaghan asked where Mollie was.

'She went out with Bill this morning. She said she was tired of being around the house and wanted a gallop. I can't understand her lately, Martin, she's so full of spirit.'

'Your little sister is fast growing up into a mischievous and very charming young woman,' O'Callaghan said. 'But, more important still, your future husband is a very hungry man. What were you cooking out there as I came in?'

'Steak and mushrooms, my dear. Are you interested?'

O'Callaghan was, and fell to with a vengeance.

'Is my father coming home for lunch?' asked Nance.

'No. He's out looking for Ogilvie to prevent him from shooting kangaroos. And I must be on my way to Kane's homestead with a similar objective. But firstly, I have brought home some treasure trove.'

To Nance's delight, he unpacked the presents purchased in Sydney and with the exception of those reserved for the Kanes, gave them to the girl to distribute. Then, to comply with her request, he had a few hours' rest before setting out for Joe Kane's homestead.

'Come and stay with us for a few days, Martin, before you go back to your hermit's quarters,' she said as he left, and he agreed to do so.

She stood watching him until he disappeared into the timber on the eastern side of the creek and then turned with a sigh which changed to an involuntary cry of joy. Far away on the north-western horizon, above the rugged line of the Moonbi Mountains, was a great, dark bank of cloud. And clouds in that quarter meant rain—the breaking of the drought perhaps, green luscious

grass, fat cattle and prosperity, and her own home with Martin. What a joyful surprise for her father! She pictured him riding down the creek, the gaunt Abo by his side, gloomily discussing the parched country and all that it portended. Not until he reached the hill above the stock-yard would he have a clear view of the north-western sky. Then he would see the clouds. And he'd come in beaming with happiness. 'Poor old Dad,' she thought, 'he worries so much.' She returned to the house and sat upon the veranda step and busied herself with her needle.

She had been thus engaged for an hour or so when, singing at the top of his voice, Alex Wade rode in alone. He had not found Ogilvy. Neither had he seen any natives. He had come to the conclusion that Abo had picketed his horse and had sought some shady nook to escape the heat, and so he had deemed it safe to return without the foreman.

'Got anything for a hungry man to eat, lass?' he asked.

She had, and as she served him she asked him what he would do when she was married.

'Make young Mollie do a bit of toil probably,' he said. 'But I think I might have a few meals at O'Callaghan's. What's that big feller been up to in Sydney? Has he got another girl friend down there?'

'He had some pretty important business to do, Dad. You'll be most grateful to him some day when you hear about it, as you will. Dear Martin. We'd all be in a pretty mess without him.'

'You're right there, lass. Holy smoke, will you look at that?'

Nance looked out of the doorway as Mollie and Bill rode in from down the creek, galloping in a mad race over the clearing to the stock-yard. The two dismounted, unsaddled their horses and came in with cheery greetings. Bill Wade was a lad of seventeen years, tall for his age, rangy and big-boned. Like his sister Mollie he loved horses, and was adept at handling and training them. Nance gave them their presents from Sydney—a pipe for her father, perfumery and materials for Mollie and a hunting-knife for Bill. Then Carl Svortzen, a short, nuggety little Swedish sailor whom Wade had engaged at Port Stephens



a year or so previously, returned from riding the western boundary of the holding, where his duty had been to prevent his employer's cattle from mixing with O'Callaghan's. Ogilvy had not yet arrived, but a late return was a common error of the big bushman's, so the hungry settlers proceeded to appease their appetites. During the meal, Alex Wade, who had already eaten, but had sat in for another cup of tea with the others, spoke of the menace of the blacks and exhorted his family to respect O'Callaghan's wishes.

'Dad,' said Mollie, her dark eyes sparkling, 'if you had kept Kane's cows off our place you wouldn't need to kill the poor kangaroos. While you were all grumbling about Joe Kane's cattle I went over and gave him a piece of my mind. I really believe he was afraid of me. Of course I told him you were going to shoot him down from the bush and Abo backed me up and said he couldn't say I was wrong.'

Mollie laughed at the look of surprise and amazement on her father's face.

'Mollie,' he said, incredulously, 'do you mean to tell me you have been over to Kane's house?'

'Not to his house, Dad; but I went over and saw him a few days ago. Abo went with me. Abo says they've had a boundary rider on our side ever since to keep their stock off our holding. So you can thank me that your stock have still got some grass to eat.'

Wade was astounded. Gradually surprise gave way to anger. Anger at the thought of his little girl visiting his hated neighbour, making herself cheap. No matter what the intention, the thing was preposterous. What would her mother have thought of it? Her mother, now ten years in her grave, whose image now sat demurely before him; who had taught this little minx her prayers, and how to read and write, and to appreciate the cultured things of life. And now she was riding heaven knew where, visiting ignorant squatters.

'You little devil,' he said, 'I forbid you to speak to any of those damned land sharks, or to go near their boundary. And keep out of Abo's company. If you want to go riding in future you can go with Bill or me. The next thing we'll have one of

them young grass thieves coming over here wanting you for his wife.'

Alex checked himself. He was taking this a bit too far, perhaps, in his anger. His last shot was hardly fair.

Mollie did not reply. As well as some of her mother's sweet disposition, she had inherited a share of her father's temper, and she dared not trust herself to speak. Instead, she fled to her room and found relief in a flood of tears. Throwing herself down upon the bed she cried herself out and then, her anger vanishing with the tears, self-accusation took its place. She had been foolish to obey that wild impulse which had arisen from Abo's vivid description of the wrongs inflicted by squatters who allowed their stock to trespass, and which had resulted in her visit to the fountain of the trouble. She had been actuated by anger, a spirit of bravado and a desire to help her father—nothing else. And she smiled now as she recollected Joe Kane's consternation and self-consciousness when she had suddenly approached him. But her father was right in speaking to her as he did. She must remember that she was a grown woman now, and bound by the fetters of convention. The suggestion that one of the Kane family should ever wish to marry her was unfair, and more or less amusing. 'Let him ever try it,' she thought grimly.

The night was hot and sultry, so Mollie raised the wooden shutter which served as a window and gazed out across the clearing. The full moon shone dimly through a filmy mist of cloud and a perfect circle of light surrounded its dull radiance. Mollie read these signs correctly—the rain clouds were gathering and the drought would soon be broken. Calm now, she was about to close the shutter and to return to the dining-room when a horseman shot out into the clearing at breakneck speed and galloped towards the house. At a glance she knew it was Abo, and that something was very much amiss to make him ride like that at night.

As his horse came to a standstill before the house the bushman, his gaunt face pale beneath its tan, reeled from the saddle and fell into Alex Wade's arms. The left side of his jacket was stained a deep crimson, and blood gushed from a wound in his

upper arm near the shoulder from which the barbed end of a broken spear protruded.

Alex, quick to realize the menace of this unfortunate happening, acted immediately.

'Nance, the medicine chest,' he ordered, as he and Svortzen carried the unconscious man inside. 'Bill, bring all the powder and bullets into the dining-room. Get the rifles, too; there's a spare one out in the tool-shed. Bring that in and give it a clean-up. Then make sure everyone's inside and bar up the doors. Mollie, you get busy loading rifles and laying out charges.'

Like most bushmen, Wade knew a little rough surgery, and Nance was of great assistance to him. Soon the splintered weapon had been removed and the wound sterilized and bound, while stimulants applied to the patient's lips quickly brought him back to consciousness. At first he began to mutter incoherently, then sat up and looked wildly around.

'Where did you run against them, Abo?' asked Wade. 'Tell me quick what happened.'

Abo shook his uninjured arm at the window.

'Damn their flamin' black hides,' he roared. 'They wasn't more'n three mile away if they was a yard. She was pretty hot up there on the tops so I had a bit of a snooze in the shade after me lunch, and then went down to the crick for a drink. While I was lyin' down on a lorg, lappin' up water, me damned powder bag come undone and fell in. I was wild, 'cause I wanted to let them 'roos know I still got me eye in. Anyhow, I still got a charge in me gun, an' enough loose powder in me pocket for another one, so I get off after a mob of 'em an' they hops away towards the Wallabadahs. They was that thick you couldn't put your finger down between 'em. Then I notices blueskins roundin' 'em up from the other side. Right oh, I says to meself, you fellers can join in the fun, but I'm makin' sure of me two shots. Then I gets a big red feller right between the two b—— eyes. She was some shot, I can tell yer, an' I seen some good shootin' in me time.'

Abo paused to draw breath, and gazed mournfully at his bandaged arm.

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'Hell, that hurts,' he moaned. 'What'd yer do to it, Alick?'

'You'll be all right soon, Abo,' said Wade curtly. 'Get on with the yarn.'

'Well, after I shot the 'roo the sun was gone, so I reckoned I'd skin it an' make for home. I'm half-way through the job when that big blueskin chief bloke comes up and tells me to stop shootin' kangaroos. "Git to blitherin' blazes and mind your own b—— business," I says. But he jist stands there and tells me Piriwallan—that's Cal—won't let me shoot 'em.

"Hell," I says, "what's Cal got to do with this? Alick Wade's my boss," I says. "I don't take no notice of Cal. While 'roos eats Alick Wade's grass," I says, "an' while I got me two good eyes and some gunpowder, I'll kill the varmints wherever I sees 'em."

'The big feller walks away, an' I'm jist gitten back down onter the crick when a spear comes whizzin' at me out of the bush. I see the bloke what threw it an' I gits a quick crack at 'im with me last shot, an' he yells like hell. Then a lot more skewers fly an' one gits me in the arm. The old nag got a fright an' bolted. Whew, didn't she go! If it wasn't for that I'd 'ave gone back an' cleaned up the whole tribe of 'em with me fists. Looks like we gonna git some rain, don't it?'

Abo was himself again.

'Looks like you've done a nasty job for your employer this time,' Wade said, as he left the bushman and set about superintending preparations for the defence of the homestead. He was not over-confident about the outcome of this impending battle. He was worried, particularly over the threat of fire apparent in the corroboree which O'Callaghan had described to him. Rain would be a blessing now. He hoped that it would come in time. That the natives would attack, he felt certain. Bru Bri knew, obviously, that the kangaroo had been shot before O'Callaghan had had a chance to speak to Abo, but the bushman's attitude, after Bru Bri had explained O'Callaghan's wishes, could have only one meaning to the native mind. Abo had either killed or wounded one of the aborigines. Only O'Callaghan could pacify Bru Bri; but as things had turned out,

even the Irishman's influence might be unavailing. Anyway, he was miles away from the homestead.

There were only two doors leading outside from the main building. One faced the creek and opened from the dining-room; the other was at the end of a little hall—a means of communication between the house and a detached kitchen at the back. Bill Wade had closed and bolted them from the inside.

On each side of the house there were two windows, and Wade formed a plan to defend those on the eastern and northern sides, where the creek and dense timber would afford good protection for the natives. Accordingly he sent the Swede to barricade the others. That left four positions for four men, Abo having assured Wade that, with one good arm, he was equal to a dozen blueskins. There was nothing to do now but await developments, and each man held his post, peering out into the darkness.

The suspense was difficult to bear. The moon shone only occasionally through dense masses of cloud, and there were long periods when the surrounding bush was in almost complete darkness. The settlers knew that, under these circumstances, the attack could come without warning, and from extremely close quarters. There was thunder in the distance. Alex Wade prayed for the storm to break. Nance and Mollie sat by the ammunition-littered table, the one pale but calm, the other quivering with excitement and expectation. As a child, Nance had witnessed an attack by aborigines. She remembered now the awful waiting, the dreadful onslaught and then the ruthless slaughter of those poor, dusky children of the bush. If only Martin would come back. He alone could prevent this tragedy.

A warning cry from Alex Wade from the front window and a spear whizzed through the aperture, struck the opposite wall and rebounded, broken, to the floor. Simultaneously Abo's rifle spoke at the other window.

'Missed,' he cried, and cursed under his breath. 'This flamin' spear jab's got me groggy.'

Alex raised his head above the sill as his foreman reloaded his rifle. The moon shone brightly through a rift in the clouds, and by its light, he fancied that he saw a dusky figure flit behind the trunk of a tree. Raising his rifle, he covered the spot and

waited. There it was again, running for the shelter of a big gum, not twenty-five yards from the house. Alex took a chance and fired and a shrill scream of pain awoke the echoes of the night.

'Look out there,' he cried, and as he spoke a shower of spears rattled against the wall. Then there was complete silence. Alex left his post and crossed over to the girls' room. Bill, who was watching at the window there, had seen nothing, but his father advised him to be extra cautious.

'They might make a massed attack,' he said. 'It's unusual for natives, but there's no telling what Bru Bri will do. And they'll probably try to fire the house. If we're in trouble at the front I'll call Carl, and you will have to stay here and watch both windows.'

Abo's rifle roared again. A weird cry answered from somewhere down the creek: '*Bunkilla Bula!*'—'Fight on'—the terrible war-cry of the Kamilaroi. '*Bunkilla Bula!*'—it sounded once more from the very front of the building, and again from the top of the hill half a mile to the west. '*Bunkilla Bula.*' '*Bunkilla Bula.*' The whole valley seemed filled with the sound, ear-shattering, shrill and horrible. It was enough to strike fear into the stoutest heart, and within the homestead, four white-faced men stood at their posts whilst the girls crouched beneath the table, clasping each other and shaking with hysterical sobs.

Alex pulled himself together and changed his plans. Judging by the volume of sound there should have been at least a hundred warriors scattered along the creek banks and in the bush to the north and west of the homestead, but this was impossible, for Bru Bri would not have had time to reinforce his men from Warrah or from the Moonbis. Obviously the war-cry was designed to frighten the settlers—to make them think that they were being besieged by a mighty force. Alex felt that this would be followed by a combined rush upon the house, probably with fire. So he ordered Bill and Svortzen to bar up one window and watch from the other, but to act mainly as reserves for the defence of the front, whence he feared a massed attack might come.

The moon had disappeared completely now, and the landscape was shrouded in impenetrable darkness. So awe-inspiring was the silence that the defenders would almost have welcomed an attack.

Again the suspense was broken by that terrible war-cry. This time it echoed in the very room itself and a window shutter, smashed from its fastenings by a heavy blow, struck Wade on the brow, felling him senseless to the floor. Abo, his red moustache bristling, his fierce eyes glistening, leaped to the opening and fired out into the night. A sickening thud followed the report of his weapon and the flash revealed half a dozen painted forms racing for the shelter of the timber. Abo wiped the sweat from his forehead and glared around the room.

'Rainin', Carl,' he said to Svortzen, who now stood beside him. 'You reckoned I didn't know nothin' about it. But I told yer this mornin' she was comin', didn't I? Yer can't tell you furriners nothin'.'

Svortzen was bewildered and fascinated by this huge fighting terror. Abo's fiery eyes held him for a second or so, then roved across the room to where the two girls were anxiously tending their father.

'That's no good,' he said. 'Here, Carl, look after this 'ere winder, while I see to the boss. I never seen a woman yet was any good in a fight.'

A crash of thunder rattled the walls and the rain—driven by a stiff northerly breeze—poured through the open windows. Alex, dizzy but conscious as a result of Abo's exertions, sat up and reached for his rifle.

'That rain'll stop 'em from firing the house, Abo,' he said. 'But it's going to make it harder for us to see. That fellow used a *nulla-nulla*. Lucky for me he hit the window instead of my head. Did he get away?'

'No. I ain't been shootin' blueskins for forty-five years for nothin'. . . . What was that? Sounded like wood breakin'.'

Abo raced across to the south side of the house and entered the main bedroom. The window was wide open and a naked warrior tumbled from the sill, leaped to his feet and hurled his club at the foreman's head. Abo ducked instinctively, catching

the missile on his arm. The native turned to flee, but seemed to hesitate, then fell, unconscious, against the wall. Abo pinioned him, and with Alex's assistance, bound him securely and tied him to the bedpost. With an order to Abo to guard both the captive and the window opening, Alex returned to the dining-room. The captive native was only a boy and he was bleeding profusely from a bullet wound in the chest. It was incredible that a lad, to all appearances mortally wounded, should force his way into the house with the object of attacking the defenders single-handed. Perhaps it was a ruse to draw the defenders away from the front windows.

Abo examined his captive by what light he could get from the lightning flashes, and deftly bound his wound with a strip torn from a sheet.

Bill, who was in the dining-room, turned on hearing his father return.

'Dad,' he whispered hoarsely, 'look out there.'

A vivid flash of lightning illuminated the landscape and glistened on the shiny, wet backs of a number of warriors, prostrated motionless in the grass, not twenty paces from the wall of the building. Alex raised his rifle.

'What the hell are you standing there gaping for?' he hissed.

'Don't shoot, Dad, for heaven's sake. As soon as a couple of rifles are empty they'll rush the house. They're close enough.'

Alex groaned. What a fool he had been not to foresee this move! He was realizing now, to his cost, the perfection of Bru Bri's generalship. The position was beginning to look hopeless. What could four men hope to accomplish against natives like that brave young fellow in the back room, who were fighting for their dearest rights under a leader superb in his native cunning and ability?

Overhead, the thunder rolled incessantly, as though nature growled her protest against human strife and bloodshed. Alex stood by the window, a prey to many emotions, his iron will and courage gradually breaking down under the strain. Another brilliant flash from the heavens; another fitful glance through the aperture, and the squatter's solemn face brightened.



'Bill,' he cried, 'a miracle has happened. They're gone. Run round to the back. They might have shifted around there.'

But no! A search was made from every side of the house and not a native could be seen. Alex suspected some new move, although he could not see why the natives had not pressed home their attack when everything was in their favour. In view of this the defenders increased their vigilance, the girls now assisting in the tedious task of peering out at every lightning flash. The rain was falling in torrents, but the blacks appeared to have vanished. It was unbelievable.

Then Nance gave a joyful shout.

'Here comes Martin,' she cried. 'Oh, thank God! It's all over now. Look, he's got a big blackfellow with him.'

Svortzen opened the door and O'Callaghan, dripping water, entered with Bru Bri.

'Anybody hurt?' he asked abruptly.

'Nothing serious, Cal,' said Wade.

Bru Bri stood near the doorway, his arms folded across his brawny chest, the water falling from his massive shoulders.

'Alex,' said O'Callaghan, 'this is Bru Bri, the king of the Moonbis. I met John Kane yesterday before I reached their homestead and I was on my way back when I heard the shooting. I guessed what had happened and galloped down. I'm glad I was able to find Bru Bri when I did, as things were looking black for you. I explained that a mistake had been made, and he was satisfied to make peace. Is Abo there?'

Wade called and the big bushman came out.

'Abo,' said O'Callaghan, 'you shot a native through the leg this afternoon. He is not seriously wounded. But some men have been killed to-night as a result of your folly. While the kangaroos are feeding on the flat lands of this valley you will leave them and the natives alone. Do you understand?'

'All right, Cal,' said Abo. 'But the blarsted blueskin speared me first. Did he tell yer that?'

'Yes, but he had good cause.'

O'Callaghan turned to Wade. 'You have Bru Bri's brother here in the house, Alex,' he said, 'and from what the chief

tells me the young fellow is pretty badly wounded. Where is he?’

Alex led the way into the bedroom, O’Callaghan and Bru Bri following. The black chief gazed down for a moment upon the form of the unconscious lad.

‘Piriwallan,’ he said, ‘if Biraban dies I will fight the white men. If you or the white people can save him, the Moonbi people will be your friends for ever.’

O’Callaghan nodded. He had expected something like this but he refrained from translating the terrible statement, which had been given in the Kamilaroi tongue. Bending down, he untied the ropes binding the young native and removed the bandage from his chest, examined the wound and felt the young fellow’s pulse. Then he placed his hand upon Bru Bri’s shoulder.

‘I am a great medicine man, Bru Bri,’ he said. ‘The young Eagle-hawk will live. He will be sick for many days but he will recover. Now, *waita uwolla*—go away. Take your warriors back to the Moonbis and do not trouble the white people any more. While Biraban lives a white flag will fly from a tall gum tree by the creek. When the moon has died and grown again the Eagle-hawk will be hunting with his tribe. Now go.’

Bru Bri grunted his acknowledgment and vanished into the storm.

O’Callaghan gave Nance some brief instructions about preliminary treatment of the young aborigine and then he followed Bru Bri.

## CHAPTER VI

### NATIVE AFFAIRS

DARKNESS had set in when John Kane reached the approaches to his home after his meeting with Mollie Wade and Abo. He was tired but happy, proud of his prowess as a fisherman and anxious to show his prize. And Mollie Wade was ever present

in his thoughts. He had seen the girl before but had never spoken with her, nor more than casually observed her. Because of the enmity between the two families social visits had been completely out of the question, and any meetings in the past had been by chance, and always under conditions where the antagonism of members of either family present had rendered even casual conversation impossible. But John was convinced now that he liked the girl. He admired her bravado. Her horsemanship he knew to be superb. And undoubtedly she was pretty—not beautiful or stately or anything like that—just mischievously pretty. Her farewell words, as she and Abo left him that morning, were somewhat conciliatory, yet containing something of a threat. She had expressed the wish that they two would meet again on friendly terms, and then had warned him not to let any of his father's cattle stray across Yellow Creek.

'It's a pity we can't all be friends up here,' he thought. 'Surely this valley's big enough for a few settlers without these eternal squabbles.'

Such considerations brought a little despondency, but he brightened up as he saw the light shining through the windows of the homestead, and he broke into a cheery whistle which brought a welcoming party to the door.

The big cod-fish was the centre of admiration. John had to give, in detail, the story of its capture. Alf Dillon told him of the many mistakes which he had made, and congratulated him upon his luck in landing the fish after so many examples of poor fishing technique. Alf gave lengthy reminiscences of the fish which he had caught and lost over the years in different parts of the country. After John had eaten his tea and had given a report about the grazing land on the flats, the fish was partly cooked to keep it fresh and the family went to bed.

On the following day, rain seeming still to be as far away as ever, Joe Kane decided to remove most of his cattle from the hill country and run them down on the river flats. For some time he had been hesitating over this course. He was loth to graze his cattle near Wade's property. It meant at least two men continually riding the boundary, and in this remote country there was always the danger of chance meetings, harsh words

and perhaps physical conflict. But the cattle were suffering from lack of good grass, and even if rain were to come within the next few days it would be a fortnight before the herbage on the higher land would recover. And so horses were saddled and the four men from the homestead rode out into the hills.

The stock were not difficult to find. The settlers knew every little valley in the neighbourhood where meagre feed remained, and from these pastures they drove the herds of cattle. When evening came, some four hundred head were herded into the clearing by the homestead and a constant watch was kept upon them until the cattle had bedded down for the night. Joe decided upon a move at daylight the following morning before any of the stock should commence to wander back to the hills.

With the morning star shining brightly in the east, and the Southern Cross still visible in the sky to the south, the menfolk ate their breakfast. Most of the cattle were on their feet, lowing, obviously not liking their new surroundings, when the four horsemen set them moving slowly westward. Alf Dillon and Allan Kane rode at the rear of the herd, Allan leading a pack-horse with camping gear. John and his father took up positions on either flank. A camp was to be set up on Yellow Creek for the two men who would act as boundary riders. The cattle, a mixed mob of white-faced, long-horned Herefords and hornless Polls, were hungry, and the stockmen allowed them to graze upon the scant herbage as they travelled. This slowed the journey considerably but minimized the danger of a stampede. Occasionally a fractious beast would break out from the flank, but the actions of horse and rider were swift, and the animal would soon be back with its fellows.

Late in the evening the first river flats were reached. Here was grass and drinking water for cattle and horses; and as the settlers were tired and hungry, a fire was made and a meal prepared.

'Well, boys,' said Joe Kane as he stretched out on the grass, 'you've done a good job. The stock won't give any trouble now. They've got grass and water, and none of them are likely

to move for a few days. I think we'll bed down here for the night, and to-morrow me and Allan'll push on towards Yellow Creek and make a camp. John, you and Alf can ride back home in the morning and relieve us at the end of the week. We'll put the tent up near that water-hole where you caught the cod, John; so you won't have any trouble in finding us.'

And so it was done. On the following day the tent was pitched upon a rope strung between two trees on the high ground near the Peel—Yellow Creek junction. There was ample grass here for the horses and, for a time, very little for the men to do. They fished occasionally but without much success, Joe Kane being too impatient and Allan a little too impetuous and over-enthusiastic. Now and again trips were made across the flats to see how the herd was faring, but there appeared to be little danger of any of the animals straying from the good pasture by the river.

Then, one evening when the moon had been darkened by cloud, and the tent-pegs had been inspected in preparation for a probable storm, Allan fancied that he heard a rifle shot.

'Nonsense,' said his father. 'Who'd be shooting round here in the dark? Probably a tree fell somewhere.'

'I don't think so, Dad,' said Allan. 'It was very faint and a long way away, but I think it was too sharp for a tree falling.'

Joe said that it was probably imagination, but he sat alert, listening, nevertheless. There was rumbling thunder in the distance, but in a moment of quiet, a faint report, like the distant crack of a whip.

'By gosh, lad, you're right,' cried Joe. 'That was a gun shot—and there's another. They're a long way away, but somebody's shooting. What do you make of it?'

'Might be somebody up at Wade's shooting 'possums,' said Allan, rather dubiously, 'but there's not much moon for that.'

They listened intently, but heard no more. Then came the storm. Chain lightning split the sky and the thunder roared incessantly. The rain fell in torrents. Joe Kane and Allan huddled in the tent.

'As soon as we can move, lad, we'd better find the horses and ride up towards Wade's. I've got no time for that mob, but

we've got to help if they're in trouble. I'm hanged if I know what it's all about, though.'

From their stores they filled waterproof bags with gunpowder, put ball and wads in their pouches and, during a temporary lull in the storm, found and saddled their horses. Then they rode southward, through the teeming rain, along the eastern bank of the creek. Whether or not the shooting had continued, they did not know, for the roar of the wind in the trees, the swish of the falling rain and the noise of the thunder drowned all other sounds.

Wet to the skin, eyes sore and strained from peering into the darkness, trusting to their horses to avoid contact with trees and boulders, their journey seemed interminable. Joe Kane turned his head towards the slight figure of his son riding behind him.

'If they're in trouble it must be natives, Allan,' he shouted. 'We'd better give the homestead a wide berth until we can find out what's going on. If they're not in trouble I don't want to see 'em.'

At length Joe judged that they were nearing the homestead, and they angled away from the creek. Then, following a vivid flash of lightning, they heard the loud, sharp report of a rifle, mingled with a high-pitched scream.

'The poor devils,' cried Joe. 'The blacks are on to them. Let your horse go and follow me. We'll edge down towards the creek and give them blueskins hell.'

The two dismounted and, with rifles at the ready, ran swiftly down the bank of the creek, quietly crossed its bed and edged into a clump of trees on the other side. During lightning flashes they caught an occasional glimpse of the homestead, away from the stream on high ground to the west. The building was in complete darkness and seemed deserted. Then suddenly a light appeared, and Joe fancied he saw a dusky figure slip out through the doorway.

'We're too late, Allan,' he whispered, 'the blacks are in there. The poor devils. Great gosh! there's Cal coming out, following the blackfellow.'

O'Callaghan came down towards the stream, walking boldly in the open, his huge figure silhouetted against the now light-

ing sky. He seemed to be examining the country as he walked. As he came within earshot Joe Kane called to him softly. O'Callaghan stiffened at the sound of Joe's voice, paused for a moment, then joined the two Kanes.

'What the devil's going on?' cried Joe.

O'Callaghan told him the story. Joe was dumbfounded.

'Well, I'll be damned,' he said at last. 'Anything me and Allan can do to help?'

'Not if we can keep Biraban alive,' replied O'Callaghan. 'You'll have plenty to do if he dies. No, there's nothing to worry about. The young fellow's pretty badly wounded, but these natives are tough and healthy. We'll pull him through. You had better both come up to the house and dry out, and get something hot into you.'

'What!' said Joe. 'Me take hospitality from Alex Wade? I'd see him dead first. We've got a camp down at the Yellow Creek—Peel junction. We'll get back. Don't you breathe a word to Wade about us coming up here.'

O'Callaghan smiled in the darkness.

'Joe Kane,' he said, 'you're a paradox. You'd risk your life to help Alex Wade, but you'd see him dead before you'd accept his hospitality. I'll say nothing about your being here.'

'There's womenfolk there. That's why we intended to help,' said Joe. 'When did you get back from Sydney?'

'Only to-day. I was on my way up to your place when I met John. I gave him all the news. There's a new pipe up home for you. The kind you like.'

'Thanks, Cal. We'll be getting along. Come on, Allan, and we'll find our horses.'

Then he paused and turned back.

'Any danger of those natives having a crack at me and Allan, Cal?' he asked. 'They'll pass our camp on the way back to the Moonbis.'

'No, Joe,' replied O'Callaghan. 'They moved off very fast after Bru Bri left. They've taken their dead and wounded and are probably back near your camp already. But Bru Bri keeps a tight rein over them, and they are not out looking for trouble.'

It was just unfortunate that Abo shot that 'roo when he did. You've got nothing to fear. There'll be no more trouble. I must get back now and see how young Biraban's faring. I'll probably see you down at your camp one evening.'

When O'Callaghan returned to Wade's homestead the only explanation which he gave for his absence was that he had been having a look around to see if there were any wounded natives about. He was besieged with questions. He reassured the family that the blacks had gone. Their casualties had not been heavy: he thought that only two had been killed, but some had been wounded. The blacks had taken dead and wounded with them. The wounded would be treated by the medicine men of the tribe. Bru Bri had assured him that there would be no attempt at revenge, provided Biraban recovered. That was the job in hand at the moment.

Through the remaining hours of the night O'Callaghan and his fiancée nursed their dusky patient, while the other members of the household, suffering reaction after their sudden relief, slept the sleep of exhaustion. Biraban's wound was bad. The shot had been fired at such close quarters that the bullet had gone clean through, missing the heart by a fraction of an inch. After the bleeding had been effectively checked externally, and the wound cleansed, they could do nothing but nurse the young man carefully and trust to Providence.

O'Callaghan admired the young chief with all a strong man's respect for courage and self-sacrifice. Hence the Irishman had a two-fold incentive to exert every energy in his endeavour to save the native's life.

On the following day he awakened Bill Wade at sunrise and sent him to tie a sheet to the topmost branch of a tall, red gum which overshadowed its fellows down by the creek. It was a difficult task, with the bark slippery from the rain, but the lad was an expert climber and soon had the signal flying.

The patient showed no improvement during the day. He was delirious and on the verge of a high fever, calling continually: '*Kalig—ngindi—baidyu.*' 'I—want—water.' O'Callaghan permitted Mollie and her father to nurse Biraban during the afternoon so that he and Nance could obtain some rest.



After that he divided the days into two watches, taking the all-night stretch himself, and leaving the daylight to Nance and Mollie.

On the second night the fever heightened, and early on the following morning, reached its climax. Biraban's strong native constitution saved his life. Gradually he began to mend. For fully twelve hours he slept peacefully and awakened to find his brother's white friend by his side, to talk to him and to comfort him.

Half that night they conversed in the Kamilaroi tongue. Finally, O'Callaghan told the native that he would have to leave him on the morrow but that the white *inargung*, the girl whom he had seen in his dreams and who belonged to Piriwallan, would remain with him until he was well enough to return to the Moonbis.

Next morning O'Callaghan left for his station on the Lower Peel. Much as he would like to have remained at Wade's until Biraban's complete recovery, the Irishman had been almost three weeks away from his holding, and the heavy rain made it necessary for him to return immediately and inspect his stock. Bill Wade, who had been detailed that day to ride the western boundary of his father's property, went with O'Callaghan.

The weather was completely fine now, for the first time since the night of the battle; yet the drought had been so intense that scarcely a drop of water remained upon the steaming ground. The parched and thirsty earth had absorbed it all. Filmy clouds still obscured the sun, and for such an early hour the heat was unnatural and almost unbearable.

The country which the riders traversed rolled away in timbered, undulating ridges, making a gentle canter an easy means of progress. The carolling of the magpies, turning over stones and sticks in their search for grubs and crickets; the deep and throaty call of the butcher-bird, singing in the topmost branches of the tall white box; and the musical cry of the rosella, calling to its mate, were pleasant sounds to their ears, belying future human songsters who were to chant so cynically about Nature's gifts to Australia.

After riding for half an hour or so in silence, the two slowed

down to a walk and Bill turned a thoughtful gaze upon his companion.

'Cal,' he said, 'you've never told us how you came to be such good friends with Bru Bri.'

'No, Bill. Have you ever asked me?'

'Well, come to think of it, I can't say that I have. All of us seem to have taken it for granted and as a matter of course. But the way you handled things the other night sort of got me thinking, and I'd like to know.'

O'Callaghan smiled.

'Well,' he said, 'I'll tell you. About twelve months before your father brought you all up here, I put in a couple of weeks over at Kane's helping them to build the big stock-yard that they have down below the house. On the night before my return, a cloud burst somewhere up near Yellow Mountain where Yellow Creek rises; and when I reached the creek it was in full flood. I decided to follow it down to the Peel junction and cross the river, which I knew would not be in flood, above where the creek comes in. But the floodwater from the Creek had backed up the Peel so far that I had to ride right back up the stream to where the Moonbi River comes in. It was late by that time, and a bit of a storm coming over, things got very dark and I lost my way. It was the only time in my experience that I ever got completely lost. But it's pretty wild country up there, and a difficult place to move about in at night. However, when the storm passed, the moon brightened things up a little. I was just getting my bearings when I heard a blood-curdling yell in the timber nearby. I rode around to see what the trouble was.' O'Callaghan paused to swat a fly. 'I saw red, Bill, and I killed a man—killed him in anger—but I have never been sorry. Had I been cool I'd have done it just the same. It was a sight to make any man's blood boil. I saw a native boy—a mere child—stretched on the ground, unconscious from a clout with a *nulla-nulla*, and a hulking black buck savage standing over him, trying to smash him to pulp. The big brute died, Bill, but his death saved the life of the whitest blackfellow that ever stalked a kangaroo. That boy was Bru Bri. I took him home and nursed him back to life, and we have been friends ever since.'

'Why was the big buck trying to murder him?' asked Bill.

'Family troubles, Bill, so far as I could gather. It appears that Bru Bri's father had a twin brother, a great warrior and a man with a certain amount of influence within the tribe. It was only natural that disputes should arise concerning the succession to the leadership, and probably because of his superior prowess, Bru Bri's father was appointed. His brother then revolted and a number of the warriors joined him. For years internal warfare ate into the heart of the tribe, threatening to annihilate it. The climax came on the night when I, fortunately, lost my way. The Chief's two sons, Bru Bri and Biraban, were asleep in the camp of the faction which was loyal to their father when the renegade brother sneaked in and drove his spear through the old man's heart. Awakened by his death shriek, and the general row, the boys fled. Biraban escaped into the mountains, but the murderer got away from the other natives and tracked Bru Bri to the river, where he captured the lad. That's where I came upon them.'

'And how did the tribe come out of it all?'

'Well, the average native fights only for his stomach, and the warrior who can lead the chase and maintain the sanctity of his tribe's hunting-grounds is the man he wants for his king. Now that the chief and his rebel brother were dead, Bru Bri gone they knew not where, and Biraban too young to assume the responsibility, they scattered over the Moonbis and through the valley, a leaderless lot of nomads. When Bru Bri recovered and went back to them he was hailed by rebel and loyalist alike. Despite his youth he is a born leader and organizer, and he has made of those tattered remnants the most powerful tribe of warriors in the country.'

Bill's young nature was enthralled by this romantic narrative and he wanted more.

'What was the rebel chief's name, Cal?' he asked.

'That I am not at liberty to tell you, Bill. It may seem absurd to you, but the Kamilaroi tribes which extend, so far as we know, over all of the country north-west from Port Stephens, have a sacred custom that a man's name dies with him. So that when a great warrior passes away his name must not be spoken again.

I have trained myself, always, to avoid breaking the rules of the natives or irritating them in any way. In that way I have gained their confidence. The aborigines react most favourably to kind and generous treatment. Respect for their customs brings its own reward. And why shouldn't we respect them? We are depriving them of their hunting-grounds. A little consideration for their feelings isn't much to give in return. There are men around Port Jackson, the Hawkesbury Valley and other parts of the colony who treat the natives as noxious pests, to be destroyed at sight. Is it any wonder that, at times, they break out and attack the settlers? Why, there are men in the Port Jackson area who actually have given natives meat salted with arsenic.'

'What, poisoned 'em?' cried Bill, aghast.

'Yes, poisoned the poor devils like you or I would poison wild dingoes.'

'Cal,' asked Bill, 'have you ever seen the Cora?'

'The initiation ceremony? No, Bill. White men are not permitted to see that sacred performance. But from discussions with the blacks I have a pretty good idea what takes place. I'll tell you. You know that the object of the ceremony is to change the eligible youths of the tribe from boys to warriors and hunters.

'First of all a dusty, oval-shaped area of ground is prepared by clearing it of all debris and grass and the boys who are candidates for manhood are grouped at one end of this arena. The Balyas, or medicine men, who right through the proceedings are the masters of ceremonies, assemble at the other end of the clearing. When everything is ready the Balyas rush out and capture the boys, one at a time, and drag them into the centre. When all of the boys are so placed the medicine men stick their *nulla-nullas* into the backs of the bark girdles which they wear. They then get down on all fours and, imitating dingoes, and howling like those animals, they run around the boys, the *nulla-nullas* sticking up to resemble the tails of the wild dogs. After this performance is over, and more preparations are made, the medicine men make another encirclement of the lads, this time done up to look like kangaroos, and they go around in leaps and

bounds. Then each of the imitation kangaroos grabs a boy, and triumphantly carries him off.

'For the next stage the boys are assembled in the clearing again, and are forced to walk across a heap of blackfellows laid out on the ground as if dead. The progress of the boys is in the direction of a group of armed and grimacing medicine men. While the boys are walking over the men on the ground, these fellows moan and scream and squirm, as though they are in mortal agony. Then the boys are lined up in a half-circle, and the Balyas form another half-circle opposite them, with one of their number in the centre. The medicine men now have spears and shields, and are decked out in war-paint as warriors. A fierce war-dance takes place with the native in the middle acting as leader. The leader is attacked by the others in turn, spears are thrown and caught on his shield, and the boys are watched carefully to see if any of their number shows signs of fear. A boy who wilts at this stage will not be allowed to complete his initiation.

'Then comes the final ceremony, the extraction of a front tooth. The first boy is placed, in horse-riding fashion, across the neck of a medicine man, and his gum is scraped with a bone which was supposed to have been removed, with great pain, from the body of a medicine man during the early stages of the ceremony. I have seen these bones and, in reality, they come from kangaroos. Then the boy's head is held by one medicine man, while another knocks out one of the lad's front teeth by placing a piece of hard wood, cut from a womerah, against the tooth, and hammering it with a stone. While this is going on the rest of the Balyas scream and yell their heads off, making the place completely hideous with sound. Each boy, after the tooth has been removed, is handed back to his relatives and ornamented by them. The boys are then grouped together again, given arms, and they are no longer weak lads, but strong warriors and hunters.'

Bill's hand involuntarily passed across his lips, touching the front of his upper jaw.

'It seems a terribly cruel business, Cal,' he said. 'Does every male aboriginal have to go through that?'

'He does if he is to become a warrior and a hunter and is not to be always a weakling. The whole thing seems cruel and senseless in some ways, but there is a lot of mysticism about it, and every phase of the ceremony has some significance. I don't pretend to understand it all, but some parts are quite clear. For instance, the dingo and kangaroo act is symbolical of the hunter and his quarry. The boys cross the groaning bodies and approach the armed medicine men to show that they will have courage to face their enemies. I don't know the significance of the tooth extraction, but it certainly proves the courage and fortitude of the lad who submits to it.'

'What happens to a boy who won't submit?' Bill asked.

'The whole thing is purely voluntary on the boy's part,' replied O'Callaghan. 'Nothing happens to him, but he is regarded by the tribe as a weakling, and of no account from then on. Mind you, although I have sketched the proceedings very briefly, the ceremony actually takes some days and nights. There are all sorts of preparations before each stage, and there is much ceremonial after each major act. But, from start to finish, the boys must remain on the spot. They are allowed neither fires nor shelter. Imagine what they must suffer when initiation takes place during July or August, as it sometimes does. Just think of it, Bill. Snow on the tops of the Moonbis, the ground covered with frost and one of those howling winter westerlies blowing. Night after night without clothing, shelter or fire. Can you wonder why the male adult native doesn't seem to feel the cold?'

'It has me beat, Cal, the way those fellows can sleep, naked, in the smoke of a small bit of smouldering wood on a frosty night. It must be the smoke blowing across their bodies which makes 'em think they're warm. Mostly imagination, I reckon.'

'Probably some form of auto-suggestion,' said O'Callaghan, 'but the human body can adjust itself, by training, to the most rigorous of conditions. Here's your boundary, Bill. Drop over and see me later on in the week. I'll be busy with the stock for a few days.'

O'Callaghan rode on alone across the timbered river flats

where the huge red gums reared their branches a hundred and fifty feet above his head. Flocks of kangaroos, cropping the scanty herbage, hopped away at his approach, their long tails thudding dully upon the moistened ground. Little kangaroo rats turned a momentary gaze upon him, then scurried for the shelter of the clumps of scrub wattle. Occasionally a large goanna, startled out of its sun-bath, turned to spit defiantly at his horse, then clawed its way to the top of the nearest gum, where its yellow-ringed tail could be seen drooping from a knotty branch. Overhead, a native thrush sounded a mellow, rippling call in happy contrast to the harsh, scissors grind of the gold-flecked dollar bird. A hundred yards or so ahead, a host of soldier-birds kept up a continuous chatter, warning the native element of the encroachment of man upon its domain.

Keenly alive and sensitive to these things, O'Callaghan's mind found peace in their contemplation after the tiring, nerve-racking events of the past few days. Tossed like a straw upon the fierce tide of revolution which had deprived Ireland of the flower of her youth, this big-hearted Celt had thrown all his genius and outraged patriotism into a detailed and affectionate study of his adopted land. The bush, to him, was now a natural companion, a friend whom he understood, a comforter—sometimes admittedly an antagonist—yet it always supplied an outlet for his emotions.

The steamy, humid heat quickened his thirst and necessitated a halt by the river, upon a sloping gravelly beach, where he drank his fill of the somewhat mud-stained water. A few more miles then, along the level flats, and O'Callaghan turned at right angles to the stream and shortly afterwards reached his destination—a one-roomed hut of wattle and daub roofed with dry gum bark—a lonely abode in a lonely land.

The squatter rode on past his dwelling for a quarter of a mile or so, then halted his horse before a slip-rail gate in a huge log enclosure, oblong in shape, and covering an area of from one and a half to two acres. A tiny spring of water seeped through the ground at the southern end, wending its way the full length of the yard, before it disappeared into the earth.

Across the centre of the yard was a log partition. In the section nearest O'Callaghan a beautiful black Arab pranced and whinnied to its prodigal companion, while the southern half imprisoned a great, white-faced Hereford bull. An enormous amount of work had been entailed in the construction of this arena, but O'Callaghan—through an excellent knowledge of his trade as a cattle-breeder—had foreseen that labour expended in this way eventually would mean work saved. The spring, the supply from which the most severe drought could not quench, watered a soft carpet of green herbage within the yard; and this, supplemented by an occasional heap of cut kangaroo grass, was sufficient for the requirements of his stud bull and spare saddle horse. By keeping the bull under control he knew that his herd of beef cattle would not wander many miles from home. Only when the animal was with the herd did he need to keep a strict eye upon his boundaries.

After yarding his horse the squatter returned on foot to his shack, and hastily prepared and ate a hearty meal. Then began a monotonous round of lonely riding; inspecting cattle, weeding out those that were sick and ministering to them or destroying them if their disease were infectious, attending to calves, and a thousand other duties. Truly a formidable task for one man. Yet, since his arrival in the valley, O'Callaghan had run his holding single-handed, soliciting help only at the yearly muster, and when taking prime beefers across to Port Stephens.

A few days after O'Callaghan's return home, Bill Wade rode across with the satisfying information that Biraban had recovered and had returned to his tribe. The settlers were safe now. They had learned their lesson and, although at times on his rides O'Callaghan had caught an odd glimpse of a native stalking a flock of kangaroos, he had complete trust in Bru Bri and expected no further trouble from that quarter.



## CHAPTER VII

### TRANSPORTED TO NEW SOUTH WALES

THE two men at the boundary riders' camp were relieved, in due course, by John Kane and Alf Dillon, who rode in one evening with fresh supplies and cheerful greetings. Even if no more rain fell the camp could be broken up before very long, and the stock driven back to the hills. The storm had not been a drought breaker, but there had been sufficient rain to produce fresh grass on the higher country, and there was every indication that the weather change would continue.

John was greatly perturbed when his father told him of the attack on Wade's homestead. It reminded Alf Dillon of the time back in '23, or it might have been '24, when he was attacked by blacks on a trip from the 'Awkesbury to Sydney Cove.

'It's a singular confounded thing,' he said, as he lit his pipe, 'but blacks is damned difficult critters to shoot. You draw a bead on 'em, you fire, an' you miss 'em. And why? Well, damned if I know. There must be a hexplanation. For one thing, if they stay still you can't see 'em, an' when you do see 'em the varmints don't stay still. Anyway, as I was tellin' you, they got on me track in the dark, an' I was blazin' away an' couldn't hit 'em, an' they was heavin' their spears an' boom-crangs at me——'

'And they couldn't hit you, Alf,' interrupted Joe, with a smile. 'Anyway the sheet was still flying near Wade's homestead yesterday, so Biraban must be getting better.'

'I couldn't see 'em bein' silly enough to haul it down if the blackfeller died,' observed Alf.

'That's where you're wrong,' said Joe. 'Cal's got a most

powerful hold over them blacks, and it's mainly because he never breaks faith with 'em. He's a fanatic that way. Sometimes, the way he goes on you'd think he was almost an aboriginal himself. Cal's a hard man to follow, but if that flag's still flying, Biraban's alive—that I know.'

The four men remained at the camp until morning, when Joe and Allan set out for the homestead after arranging to return in a week's time and assist in removing the stock.

John left Alf at the camp and rode up the creek towards Wade's. He was worried. From his father's sketchy account of the attack it was apparent that the defenders could not have held out much longer. What a frightful experience for Mollie—and her sister. It was wrong for two young girls to remain in this dangerous country. Wade was selfish and heartless to allow it. Then John thought of his mother. Would she return to civilization whilst her family remained in the wilderness? Would an attack by natives send her scurrying back to Sydney? John realized, then, something of the courage and heroism of these bush women. He saw Wade's homestead through the timber on the other side of the creek. A wisp of white fluttered from a nearby tree, so all was well. He thought of riding over to the house, but hesitated. If Alex Wade were at home there would be a row, and should the squatter be away from home there would be embarrassment.

A female figure left the house and came a little way in his direction. Whether it was Mollie or Nance he could not determine at that distance. He fancied it was Mollie, but it might be only fancy. Whoever it was, she saw John and waved to him. It was Mollie all right. John waved his hat. She looked at him for a while, waved again, then turned and went back to the house. John felt infinitely lonely as he sat a little longer on his horse and gazed towards the homestead.

Further downstream he found a small mob of heifers straying towards the creek bank, and he turned them back to the flats. Then he rode back to the camp.

O'Callaghan came in that evening and had tea with the two boundary riders. The Irishman answered John's eager ques-

tions and gave a detailed account of the trouble at Wade's. John suggested that O'Callaghan should stay at the camp for the night. On O'Callaghan's accepting the invitation the three men settled down for a yarn.

They talked of natives and of cattle, of droughts and floods and animals. O'Callaghan told the others a little of his visit to Sydney, and of the rapid development of the town. The conversation turned to fish. John mentioned the big cod caught after his return from Port Stephens.

'There should be some in the holes down your way, Cal,' he observed.

'Ask Alf,' said O'Callaghan with a smile.

'Now you come to mention it, Cal,' said Alf, puffing at his pipe, 'I was just goin' to say what a singular confounded thing that was. It was three—or it might have been four—yes, it was three years ago, Jack. I'm down givin' Cal a hand to muster some stock, an' I decides to go fishin'. The river's pretty dry, but I knows a good hole down below his homestead. When I gets there the water's black, and damn and dash me confounded buttons, me horse wouldn't drink it. If a horse won't drink water you can say that water's poison. No good to man or beast, an' no good to cod-fish neither. So I goes and tells Cal. He only grins. "There's a couple of big holes down there like that, Alf," he says. "Bru Bri's mob poisoned 'em to bring the fish up." "Poisoned 'em," I says. "What with?" "With gum bushes," he says. "They throw gum bushes in them holes when the water's not runnin', an' when they rot the eucalyptus kills the fish an' brings 'em up to the top." Did you ever hear the like o' that, Jack? Dash me buttons, them blueskins knows a trick or two.'

'Do the natives make a habit of that?' asked John. 'I haven't seen it happen up our way.'

'No,' said O'Callaghan. 'There are a couple of deep holes down on my holding which they poison occasionally in a drought. They have more sense than to do it extensively, because all fish in the section, whether large or small, are killed. They work one hole, leave a couple, then poison another, and so on.'

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For a while the conversation lapsed, the three men smoking reflectively, then John broke the silence.

'Cal,' he said, 'I've known you for a long while, but you've never told me, or Dad either, for that matter, how you came to be transported to New South Wales.'

There was a long silence. John was beginning to wonder if he had hurt his friend, when O'Callaghan spoke.

'We ex-convicts prefer to forget these things,' he said quietly.

'Sorry, Cal,' said John. 'I didn't mean to hurt you, I just wanted to hear your story.'

'You folks have taken me as you found me for many years, lad,' replied O'Callaghan. 'Let it be that way, and let the past bury itself.'

O'Callaghan rose from the log on which he had been sitting and went out to see to his horse. When he returned he relit his pipe with a brand from the fire.

'What sort of a crime do you think I committed in the old country, John?' he asked.

'Cal,' cried John, 'I know, and Dad and all of us know, that you couldn't commit a crime if you tried. Forget it, and let things be, as you said.'

O'Callaghan placed his saddle on the soft grass near the tent, loosened the laces of his heavy boots and stretched out comfortably with the leather for a pillow.

'This is a grand country, John,' he said. 'Those who thought, in the beginning, to make it a prison have already been belied. A great, wide, generous land like this can never be a gaol. Why, it would convert even its own gaolers, it's so free and open. You, who have been reared here, could never appreciate the unscrupulous intrigues, the plots and counterplots in high places, and the sufferings of the unfortunate people in the old world.'

O'Callaghan paused, and the others made no remark.

'When I was but a small child,' he went on, 'my father was killed fighting with the United Irishmen at a place called Vinegar Hill, a high outcrop overlooking Enniscorthy in County Wexford in the south of Ireland. That was in June of the year

1798 shortly after the capture of Lord Edward Fitzgerald, in the great rebellion which preceded the passing, by the Irish Parliament, of the Act of Union. My father was a good farmer. He was a brave and patriotic man, but only an amateur soldier. Yet he was an officer in the rebel army. Vinegar Hill was the headquarters of the United Irishmen. It was attacked by General Wade—Alex may be a relative of his, I don't know, but it doesn't matter. Wade had an army of twenty thousand British troops and Irish militia, and as the United Irishmen had little ammunition, ultimate defeat for them soon became apparent. The hill was surrounded, with the exception of one sector. The defenders decided to retreat through this gap towards Wexford, and my father remained behind in charge of a rear-guard company to delay the attack and assist the retreat. He and most of his men were killed.

'The rebellion, which was badly organized and which, some say, was fostered by the protagonists of the Union for their own purposes, was a dismal failure. There were many execution and atrocities committed by both sides. The country seethed with informers. Politicians were bribed, and in an atmosphere of corruption and murder the Act of Union was passed.

'During all this time I was at school in Dublin. Unlike most Irish farmers my father was not a poor man, and he was able to give me an education. I did not know my mother. She died shortly after my birth. I had one brother, Felix. He was much older than me, and took an active interest in politics. He would not accept the Union, and after the rebellion had been suppressed he fought on as a guerrilla with Michael Dwyer, in the mountains of Wicklow. I remember one day after my father's death, Felix came to see me at the boarding school in Dublin and, in great anger, he told me many things which I could not understand. I did not see Felix again, but years later, I was told that he died from wounds received in a brush with the militia at the Glen of Imaal in the Wicklow Mountains. That, I think, was in 1802.

'I continued on at school. I was the sole survivor of that branch of the O'Callaghans, and inherited my father's farm.

For a while I studied law, but gave it up and went on the land on my father's old property in Tipperary. There I farmed for a few years, but the tyranny and oppression which surrounded me, and the unhappy state into which my country seemed plunged for ever, gradually played on my nerves. I sold the farm and went to Dublin. I was there when George IV visited the capital in 1821. The people of Dublin welcomed the king in the most enthusiastic and cordial manner, but after his departure every conceivable kind of cruelty was perpetrated. The Dublin masses reacted, and the city became a hotbed of outrage and assassination. The whole thing sickened me. I hated both the English and Irish nobility, and I found myself beginning to despise many of my countrymen in my own walk of life. With money in my pockets I left Dublin in disgust, and made for the west. In Galway, mainly for something to occupy myself, I took a job as a farm labourer. There I saw something of the rack-renting, ejectments and crippling land tithes which were sending thousands of Irish tenant farmers to ruin, and driving them from the land. Somebody told me of "Captain Rock's Men", a kind of secret society organized for the protection of the small farmers. In an impetuous moment I joined this society. I was quickly disillusioned. These people were most unscrupulous. They went far beyond the objectives for which the society had been formed. There were many drunkards among them, and unpardonable outrages were common. I had words with one of the leaders and left the society. I was promptly informed against, arrested, convicted and transported to New South Wales.

Alf Dillon relit his pipe, but before he could make an observation, John broke in.

'You're happy now, Cal, aren't you?' he asked softly.

'Yes, lad. I'm very happy. I'm a free man in a free country. I have my own property, good and loyal friends, and I'm soon to marry the finest girl in the world. What more could a man want? I love Ireland, and I sincerely hope that that unhappy land, eventually, will find peace. But at present, it is so tortured from without and within, that such hope appears to be almost without foundation.'

'What sort o' blokes did you have on the convict ship, Cal?' asked Alf. 'I mind the time when I was down on the 'Awkesbury in '21——'

'The convicts are a mixed lot,' said O'Callaghan. 'To my mind they resolve themselves into three groups. There are the political prisoners, Irish, English and Scotch. With some exceptions these are a pretty fair bunch. They've had the courage to suffer for their principles. Their characters are strong, and as their sentences are served or remitted, they are becoming great assets to this country. Then there are the petty thieves and poachers, sentenced for offences which are of small moment, morally, but of some importance in the eyes of the law. As a class, these are weak and easily led. They are involved in most of the minor plots and mutinies on the convict settlements, usually as the scapegoats of others. Lastly we have the real criminals; men sentenced for near-capital offences or for implication in capital offences—a mixture of villains, tricksters and confidence men. These fellows are steeped in crime, and will never be of any use to New South Wales.

'I met one of them, John, when I was in Sydney—a fellow named Ruskin. He was on the ship with me—a great hulking, snivelling brute, capable of anything, yet always toadying to the authorities in the hope of gaining small or large favours. He has sworn many a poor wretch's life away since an English jury convicted him as an accomplice in murder. I fancy Ruskin must have given King's evidence at the trial, otherwise he would have been hanged instead of being transported. He wasn't in Sydney long before he was transferred to Van Dieman's Land. But, as I say, I met him in Sydney when I was down there a few weeks ago. He's an overseer of convicts now. He saved an officer from drowning, I believe. That gave him a start, but he must have exposed plenty of plots to win his present position. From what I saw of his use of the whip, he's a most efficient overseer.'

'Cal,' asked John, thoughtfully, 'do you think Dad and Alex Wade could have inherited some of that old-world bitterness and that's why they hate each other so much? I don't

know much about the Wades, but I'd like to be friends with them. So would Allan. Mum seems just to want to be sort of neutral. What do you think?'

'There may be something in it, lad. Your father came from Cornwall and Cornish people can be cranky. Alex Wade's an Englishman. I know nothing of his background. But they're both fine fellows. Their enmity is sheer prejudice and foolishness, because there's plenty of room for all of the stock which they can ever hope to work in this valley. Their hostility isn't deep-rooted, either. Why, the other night your father was prepared to risk his life to save Alex and his family from the natives. And Wade would do the same by him. No, lad. There's nothing in it. At heart they're not really enemies and time will make them friends. Do you like Mollie?'

The directness of the question brought a flush to John's cheeks. He was thankful for the darkness.

'Yes,' he said, 'I do. I think she's very nice.'

'Good,' said O'Callaghan. 'Then keep your heart up, lad. Things'll straighten out in due course. Now what about turning in? You and Alf use the tent. I'm quite comfortable here. It's a very mild night.'

O'Callaghan lay back with his head upon the saddle. For a while he gazed at the stars, bright in the clear, rain-washed sky. He thought of that poor, torn country, which was once his home—of his father, sacrificed for his friends, and of his brother, Felix, whom he had never really known. He thought of the 'Rock Men', of his trial, of the convicts. And then he thought of Bru Bri and the Golden Valley. He dismissed the old past as a fevered nightmare, and he thought of Nance—fine, brave, happy Nance. What a grand world it was, after all!

O'Callaghan wakened with the dawn, and breakfast was cooking when the others emerged from the tent.

After breakfast, O'Callaghan rode on up to Wade's, and John and Alf Dillon went fishing. The river was running again now after the rain, and so was Yellow Creek, but both streams were quite muddy. Some cat-fish were caught, but no cod. There was too much fresh in the water for the big fellows to



bite. But the cat-fish, skinned and grilled, gave the two men a welcome change of diet.

Until the end of the week the boundary riders followed a routine programme, their work becoming more and more unnecessary as the river flats reacted to the rain, and fresh herbage developed in abundance.

When the end of the week came the camp was broken up. Joe Kane and Allan arrived and the stock were moved back. But Joe could see no point in taking the cattle right up to the hill country.

'With all this green feed about and plenty of water, they won't stray far,' he said. 'We'll leave them on the eastern end of the flats for a few weeks, and move them up beyond the homestead in a month or so if we get no more rain.'

Joe Kane was worried about dingoes. Amongst the cattle grazing on the eastern sector, a number of young calves had been pulled down and destroyed. He thought one big dog was responsible for most of the killing. He had seen the creature early one morning and it had gone off in the direction of Yellow Mountain. It was obviously not killing for food, but just for sheer lust and devilment. He had tried poison, but the animal would not take a bait.

With the exception of the rat, the dingo, known also as the native dog, was the only Australian native animal which resembled in any way the quadrupeds of the old world. The dingo was the subject of interminable arguments among the early settlers as to whether or not it was, in fact, a native. And the discussions, still unsettled, may be heard to this day. It appears that there is a certain similarity between the dingo and some dogs indigenous to China and the islands of the Malay Archipelago. It has been suggested, and indeed is highly probable, that, in the not very distant past, some of these dogs landed on the north coast of Australia in charge of wandering Malays, and strayed into the bush, where they bred and spread throughout the country. This argument is strengthened by the fact that dingoes were not found in Tasmania.

In size and shape the dingo bears some resemblance to the larger species of European shepherd's dog, with the head

half-dog and half-wolf. It does not bark, but emits a high-pitched, mournful, yelping howl; and when it bites it does not seize hold but snaps like a sheep-dog. In colour it is of a yellowish-red, with shaggy hair, bushy tail, thick, powerful neck and erect and pointed ears. It has a strong and disagreeable odour. In many instances the natives domesticated it, and were known to use it for hunting purposes.

Usually the dingo had its lair in caves or canyons in the mountains, whence it emerged at night to hunt its prey. But when one of these animals developed fully its latent killer instinct, there was no limit to the damage which it could cause amongst domesticated stock.

The settlers knew that Yellow Mountain contained the haunts of many dingoes, and it was decided that John Kane and Alf Dillon should ride up there and endeavour to trap the marauder. It would be a most difficult task, for the dingo has a most keen sense of smell, and the settlers had no dogs.

The two men decided to proceed to Yellow Mountain in daylight, and try to pick up the route which the creature was accustomed to follow when returning to its lair. As Joe Kane had seen the dog, in the early dawn, returning from its raids, the animal could reasonably be expected to reach the mountain fastnesses after daylight. John's plan was to camp at Yellow Mountain, and take up a position before dawn near the dingo's return track, if he could find it. Then, should the wind be favourable, the hunt should prove successful.

Yellow Mountain is a solitary, cathedral-like cluster of peaks on the south-eastern fringe of the Golden Valley. John and Alf reached the place in the early evening and began examining the rocky caves which abound there. Dingo spoor was in evidence at the entrance to many of these caverns, but to decide which one housed the animal they sought presented a problem not easy of solution. Finally it was agreed that an animal, returning from the Golden Valley to any one of the caves located on the western face of the mountain, would probably follow the long, deep gully which formed the head of Yellow Creek. The wind being from the western quarter, and likely to remain there, the two men decided to picket their horses and camp on

the southern side of the mountain and move across to the gully before dawn, on foot.

When the first light of morning came, the hunters had taken up their positions at the head of the gully amongst the great basalt rocks and boulders which abounded there. It wasn't long before they detected a distinctly doggy aroma on the fresh westerly breeze, and three dingoes came loping up the gully, one with the body of a kangaroo rat in its jaws. There was nothing outstanding about these dogs, so the men held their fire, and the animals passed them and went on up the mountain.

Just as the sun was rising the big fellow appeared. John recognized him from Joe Kane's description. He was half as big again as a normal dingo. His great jaws were open, his tongue lolling out. His mouth was flecked with blood and foam and his body dripping with perspiration. He loped right on, and, when fifty yards off, John shot him through the chest, and Alf, running up, finished him off with a bullet through the head. The two men then went back to their camp, boiled the billy, then secured their horses and commenced the long ride home.

They were cautiously descending the rocky face of Yellow Mountain when Alf drew John's attention to the distant Moonbis. A dense mass of black cloud hung over the mountains like a pall, deepening their varied hues to an almost even colour of deep blue, so dark that it was almost impossible to distinguish between mountain and cloud. At intervals, white curtains of rain broke the monotony of the picture. These films of white stood out in bold relief against the severe background, increasing visibly in density until the whole of the range became obscured. Occasionally a bright chain of lightning split the black canopy, forking into grotesque shapes and hanging thus for a time before it vanished.

'Come on, Alf,' said John. 'The sooner we get moving the more chance we've got of getting home dry.'

Alf grunted his approval and they rode steadily northward. The storm then broke to the west of Mulla Mountain, the highest peak of the eastern arm of the Moonbis, which at this point extend almost to the northern bank of the Peel River.

'It's a singular confounded thing,' said Alf as he watched the lightning run along the top of the mountains, 'but that there lightning reminds me of the time twenty—I think it was in '13—anyhow, twenty year ago's near enough. I was ridin' down to Sydney Cove from the 'Awkesbury and run into one of them there confounded storms. The lightnin' was lickin' along the ground like she's doin' up there on the mountains now, and settin' afire to the grass wherever she touched. Then the rain'd come peltin' down and put the fires out. Queer the way these things work out, ain't it? If it weren't for that rain there'd 'a been bush fires and Lord Bloomey! I might 'ave been burnt to a cinder.'

John didn't show much interest. Several times, in fact whenever a storm was brewing, John had heard this yarn; but usually there was some form of variation. Alf was a real bush philosopher with an anecdote ready for every occasion, but to John, his repetitions became somewhat monotonous.

Alf drew his stubby pipe from between his teeth and spat at the bole of a tree.

'Damn and dash me confounded buttons,' he roared, 'if it ain't the queerest thing I ever seen.' He sat back on his horse as though he had won a great argument.

Rain was falling as the riders drew up before the stock-yard, and the air was sweet with the scent of the moistening dust. Joe Kane was pleased to hear of the success of the hunt. The storm was raging at its peak by the time the family was seated around the meal table, the crashing reverberations of thunder making conversation impossible. Then the thunder eased and a steady downpour followed. As Joe Kane scanned the weather before retiring, he observed that the valley was in for floods.

'I thought this was coming,' he said. 'Once the weather breaks after a drought, as it did a few weeks ago, things get humid and more rain builds up. The barometer out the back was lower this afternoon than I have seen it for years, and when rain sets in from the north like it has done this afternoon, we can expect plenty.'

Joe was right. According to the measuring can outside the homestead door, six inches of rain fell that night, and it was still

raining when morning broke. It eased in the afternoon, and Allan rode down towards Yellow Creek to drive any stray cattle off the low-lying pastures, but the intervening gullies were so swollen with floodwater that he was forced to return. The river had not yet risen to any great extent, but as many of the stock as could be located in the short interval between the cessation of rain and darkness were driven from the flats to the higher country to the south.

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE FLOOD IN THE PEEL

WHEN Joe Kane arose at sunrise next morning he found John already dressed and eating a lone breakfast in the kitchen.

'The flats are all under water, Dad,' John said as his father entered. 'I got up at daylight and rode down to have a look at the river. After breakfast I think I'll ride downstream a bit, just in case any of the stock's got cut off.'

His father thought for a moment.

'I'm going to get Alf to tan a few hides to-day,' he said. 'I want to get them done before it gets too hot. I'll take Allan with me and we'll ride down the river as far as we can. You can take a bit of lunch, strike due north as far as the flood'll let you, and turn up along our side of Yellow Creek. I'm afraid that if any of the cattle have been caught they'll be past help. But if you see any carcasses, locate them and we'll skin them to-morrow. The flood'll be starting to go down now, so you won't have much trouble unless there's been another storm up the river during the night.'

John finished his breakfast while Mary Kane, who had now risen, packed him some lunch. Mary took these things philosophically. Floods, droughts, fires—she had had her share of all of them. They made work and worry and trouble, but you had to take the bad with the good.

John took up his rifle, strolled up to the stock-yard, saddled and mounted Charcoal and set off leisurely towards the north. Every trace of rain had vanished from the sky, leaving it a beautiful blue; and the gentle breeze created by the motion of the horse was laden with the mingled scent of rain-washed apple trees and purple Darling pea. The Moonbis reflected the early-morning sunlight from their glistening, water-washed precipices. Sparkling raindrops hung in the tree foliage, moistening the rider's face as he brushed through the bushes.

Over hills he rode, through little valleys where his horse splashed its way across tiny rivulets; down the deeper gullies, chest-high in raging torrents, till at last he emerged from the high country on to the muddy river flats below. For half a mile he proceeded north and then halted. Wherever the eye could pierce the dense forests a great lake of muddy water could be seen stretching away towards the river. After a brief inspection, he decided that any cattle caught within the compass of that vast sea were beyond human assistance, so he turned and rode westward, keeping above the fringe of the water. This course brought him along a ridge, through a mob of frightened steers, to the bank of the river itself.

What a sight it was! Surging yellow water, foaming past some three or four feet below the margin of the high bank on which he stood, buffeting the staunch trunks of the river gums, eddying away in great whirlpools four or five feet in diameter, and carrying, on its foam-flecked surface, immense trees torn bodily from the ground. John sat his horse and gazed awe-stricken. Floods were not new to him, but the Peel in angry mood always held him fascinated.

A dull splash drew his attention downstream, just in time to see a huge piece of the bank, a victim to the furious onslaught, subsiding into the river. Logs and trees were sweeping by now in increasing quantities, indicating that the river was still rising and snatching timber from the higher levels on its banks. John wheeled around, alarmed. A stream of water was sweeping across the peninsula on which he stood, threatening to cut off his retreat and engulf him. With a shout, he put Charcoal to a gallop, riding hard at the little knot of frightened steers huddled

upon what was now virtually an island, and driving them into the flood. With the exception of one beast, which was swept off its feet, the cattle reached the higher ground, and as his horse carefully felt its way to safety, John heard the gurgling death-bellow of this poor beast as it went to its doom in the boiling whirlpool of the river.

Wherever it was possible to reach the river bank he did so, and as he halted for lunch on Yellow Creek in the early afternoon he calculated that he had saved the lives of over fifty head of cattle. The little creek had flooded severely but was now receding, and looked puny indeed by comparison with the raging Peel.

As John remounted he thought what a pity it was that all this precious water was allowed to flow away unrestricted, after the terrible hardships of a few weeks ago. 'Someday,' he thought, 'someone will find a way to dam it up and use it in the droughts.' But John was wrong. Over a century has passed since he entertained that thought, and the farmer on the Peel still battles through the long droughts, then stands upon the trembling banks and watches the precious water sweeping by. Still the same reflections fill his mind—the same impotent sense of waste.

His day's work almost completed, John rode southward towards the head of the creek. He saw Wade's homestead nestling in the trees of the opposite bank. He wondered how they had fared in the flood—how many cattle they had lost. And O'Callaghan, further down the river? He must have suffered heavy losses. The sheet had gone from the big gum tree now, but everything seemed peaceful.

'I suppose Biraban's recovered and gone back to his tribe,' he reflected. 'That's if he got away before the river came down. Wonder what Mollie's doing.'

Without checking his horse he continued up the creek, determined to go another half-mile or so and then swing away towards the east, and home.

Then he fancied he heard the bleat of a calf in agony. The sound came from the direction of the stream. He reached the creek bank and saw the little creature struggling, hopelessly

bogged in the mud which fringed the other side of the flood. He gazed at the racing water and hesitated. Why should he risk his horse, and perhaps his life, to rescue an animal which belonged to Alex Wade? But why shouldn't he? He could find no answer to either question; but to leave the poor little brute to its fate would be sheer cowardice and cruelty, so he forced Charcoal into the water. As the Arab commenced to swim, John dropped off the horse's back into the surging current, supporting himself by the animal's tail. The current was swift, but the swollen creek, at this point, was not more than twenty yards wide. After a brief struggle the horse's forefeet touched the ooze of the bottom, some fifty yards below the distressed calf. The bank here was low, but steep and slippery. Before John could find his feet, or attempt to mount, the horse began to climb. The sodden earth gave way beneath the animal's weight. The horse floundered for a moment, made another attempt at the bank, and then topped backwards. John saw the black mass falling and tried to throw himself clear. Then his head seemed to crack. A thousand lights danced before his eyes. A thousand jumbled thoughts flitted through his reeling mind. There was a picture of a black-haired girl on horseback, and then darkness came over him.

'Dad, for heaven's sake listen to me and don't rave. His horse crushed him into the water. I saw it—and pulled him out. I had to tell Carl to bring him here. What else could I do? Would you have me let him drown?'

The voice sounded far away, as though someone were speaking in a spirit world. John tried to recover his senses, to place himself, but in vain. The speaker ceased, and the deep-throated, angry tones of a man seemed to break through the haze.

'What was he doing on our side of the creek and it in flood? Answer me that, lass.'

'One of our calves was bogged, and he swam over to pull it out of the mud. I heard it bellowing and went down—just in time.'

'Well, leave me alone, girl. I want to think. Go and look after him.'

Gradually, but ever so gradually, John's faculties returned



to him. The words which he had overheard rushed through his numbed mind, but he could not piece the broken threads together. A woman was bending over him, bathing his brow with cold water. Defying the excruciating pains shooting through his head, he opened his eyes and looked at her for a moment. He attempted to speak—to thank her—but she motioned him to be silent and held a spoonful of liquid to his lips. A drowsiness came over him and he sank again into unconsciousness.

When next he opened his eyes he thought it was evening. His head was a little clearer now, though aching painfully and throbbing intensely. He was lying upon a comfortable bed in what appeared to be a woman's bedroom. The walls were lined with calico and the ceiling appeared to be made of the same material. The walls had been stained or painted a pastel shade of green. The ceiling was white. In one corner of the room there was a dressing-table, apparently made of rough-hewn timber, but prettily covered with some type of cloth material. On the table were the usual ornaments and requisites, a large grease lamp and a bowl of freshly cut wild flowers. A wardrobe had been built into one corner of the room. A neatly arranged curtain, hanging across the only window, kept out the westering sun, and on the other side of the room was another bed. The window was not glazed, but its wooden shutters had been removed.

John was alone. He could not think very clearly. He moved his limbs and was relieved to find no bones broken. He seemed to have a bruise on his forehead and some skin off the side of his face. His right shoulder ached, but he was able to move all of the joints.

He tried to reconstruct what had happened, but it was useless. Even the snatches of conversation which he had vaguely heard now seemed to evade him. He knew that he was in Wade's homestead and that someone had dressed his damaged face. Whether it was Mollie or Nance he did not know.

And then he went to sleep. When he awakened the lamp was burning on the dressing-table. His head was reasonably clear and the throbbing had ceased. He was stiff and sore and

extremely hungry. He was dressed in pyjamas. He remembered everything now. His horse had overbalanced on the steep bank of Yellow Creek and apparently had fallen on him. And here he was in a pretty mess, in bed in the house of his father's enemy. His clothes were gone—drying somewhere, he thought. Then the little Swedish boundary rider appeared in the doorway with jacket, breeches, boots and leggings complete, the huge bundle almost hiding his grinning features.

'Saved dem all high an' dry above de vater line,' he said as he tossed the clothes on to the floor. 'Dat girl vos rake you out ob de creek like Carl vos rake a clinker out ob de furnace aboard ship.'

'Did she go into the creek after me, Carl?' asked John.

'She do dat orright. Carl vos see her. She pull you out an' look at you like my mudder look ven my farder beat me after Carl blow her up mit blasting powder before he run away to sea.'

When a lad, Svortzen, whose father was a wood-getter in the Daarl district of Sweden, had thrown a flask of the old man's explosive into the fire on which his mother was boiling the week's washing. The good woman had been slightly injured by the consequential explosion, and the return of Svortzen senior had been disastrous. Carl had run away to sea.

Despite himself John laughed at the peculiar expression of the little ex-sailor, then, becoming serious:

'What happened to my horse?' he asked.

'Your horse orright. He is out in de vat you call horse pen. Dat likker on de table is no good for a man mit a sore head. You let Carl tie up dem shoe lace. No, you tie dem yourself. Carl vos beat it before dat girl come in an' go vild 'cause Carl drink dat likker.'

Grinning from ear to ear the little Swede poured himself out a liberal nobbler from the brandy flask on the table, swallowed it at a gulp and vanished silently from the room.

John finished his dressing with difficulty and sat down on the side of the bed to await developments. There was a gentle knock on the door, and he opened it to admit Nance bearing a tray of home-made biscuits and tea. He felt awkward and embarrassed, but the girl quickly put him at his ease.

'Sit down and drink this, Mr. Kane,' she said. 'You can't expect to go home to-night. It's too late and you're not fit for the ride.'

'I never felt better, Miss Wade,' he replied. 'I must go, or my father'll be sending out a search party.'

'You have no need to worry about your people. Ogilvy rode over to your place as soon as you showed signs of recovering, and he'll tell your father that you're staying here for the night. Ogilvy has a room at the back of the house. You can sleep there. Be careful what you say to Dad, won't you? I know he's grateful for what you tried to do, but he's very obstinate. He can't forget his squabble with your father.'

John understood and longed for good old Charcoal and the feel of the saddle leather beneath him. But there was a great deal of truth in what Nance had said. At the moment, he didn't feel sufficiently strong to make another attempt at crossing the flooded creek, particularly in the dark.

'Thanks,' he said. 'I'll stay.'

There was an awkward pause. 'Could I see your sister for a while?' he said. 'I want to thank her for what she did for me.'

'She's out in the dining-room with Dad and Carl and my brother. Do you feel well enough to join them, or would you rather slip quietly off to bed?'

John felt that Nance was testing him.

'I'll come out,' he said.

Nance preceded him into the dining-room.

'Here's the patient,' she said. 'He wants to go home.'

Alex Wade was sitting in his chair, smoking and thinking. Mollie was sewing by the light of a candle, Svortzen playing some form of patience at a small table beside her. Bill Wade was carving a piece of wood into the shape of a boomerang.

Alex Wade rose to his feet.

'You can't go home to-night, young man,' he said. 'You're not fit for the ride. We don't like you people, but we can find a bunk for you.'

The contempt in his voice was so obvious that John flushed.

'Thank you for your hospitality, Mr. Wade,' he said. Then he turned to Mollie. 'And thank you, Miss Wade, for helping

me as you did. But I am quite fit to ride and quite anxious to get home. Carl, could you help me to saddle my horse?’

Mollie admired the dignity with which he had taken her father’s insult.

‘Mr. Kane,’ she said, firmly, ‘we will not allow you to go home to-night. My sister and I will be most grieved if you will not accept our hospitality.’

Alex Wade felt a little foolish and a little ashamed. Mollie rose, placed her hands on John’s shoulders, and gently forced him into a chair.

‘There,’ she said, ‘you’re as weak as a kitten. You’re my patient, you know, and you can’t leave here until I discharge you. Why, he’s——’

John had slumped over.

‘He’s got a touch of concussion,’ Mollie said. ‘Dad, you’re a big oaf.’

Nance produced a pillow and some blankets and they made John comfortable upon the floor. Alex was perturbed now, and was debating the wisdom of trying to get O’Callaghan over, when John recovered. He said he was all right. He thought he had just blacked out through weakness. Alex was anxious to make amends. He talked breezily of horses and cattle and the floods, and the others helped to keep the conversation going; so that John, for an hour or so, was merely a quiet listener. Alex spoke of the attack on the homestead by the blacks, and of Biraban’s recovery. He recounted some of the things which O’Callaghan had seen and heard in Sydney.

‘Martin says that heifers are bringing as much as twenty pounds a head down there,’ he said. ‘I haven’t said anything to Martin yet, but I think it would pay us to try and muster a few and get them down while the price is like that.’

‘You’d have to drove them overland,’ said John. ‘It wouldn’t pay to try and ship them from Port Stephens.’

‘I admit that,’ said Wade, ‘but it would be possible to drive a mob through Warrah and down on to the Upper Hunter. It wouldn’t be hard then to get to Newcastle, and they should be just as much in demand there as breeding stock, as in Sydney. There are a lot of settlers along the Hunter now, you know.’

John admitted that the idea had possibilities. Then the conversation turned to Nance's wedding, which was to take place next year. This would mean a trip to Sydney. Mollie, of course, was to be bridesmaid and it was thought that Bill would probably be best man. Nance was going to become a Catholic, because that was O'Callaghan's religion; and although some people didn't like Catholics, everybody liked O'Callaghan. There couldn't really be anything seriously wrong with a creed which a man with his principles embraced.

Nance interrupted.

'Mollie,' she said, 'you're a chatterbox. I can't become a Catholic just because Martin is one. He's taught me a great deal about his faith and I think it's most beautiful but—well, I don't know. Time will tell. But don't chatter so.'

Mollie made a mouth, and went on with more about the wedding, and the new house which O'Callaghan would have to build, and how they would all have to batch without Nance, and so on.

John was enchanted. Never in his life had he enjoyed much company, and he felt that the others were just as pleased to have him for a listener as he was to be one. But greatest joy of all was in the realization that the old enmity was breaking down, as Martin had said it would in time.

They made him some hot beef tea for supper and Alex Wade went with him to Ogilvy's room.

'It's a bit rough, lad,' he said, 'but I reckon you've camped under worse conditions. Sorry I hurt you to-night. I've got no quarrel with you, but your Dad and me just don't hit it.'

He helped John to undress, then wished him good night and hoped that he'd feel better in the morning.

John thanked him.

'Mr. Wade,' he said, 'my father and my brother heard the shooting when the blacks attacked you the other night. They rode from the Peel River through the storm to help you. They were about to take the blacks from the rear when O'Callaghan met them and told them how things were. You couldn't expect an enemy to act like that.'

Wade stared at him incredulously

Ask Cal,' said John. 'He'll tell you the story.

Wade said nothing but turned and left the room.

John was awakened by the morning sun shining through the window. He was still a little stiff, but his weakness had gone. Nance told him that the men were out on the boundaries. They had all eaten, but his breakfast had been kept for him. Nance said that everyone had enjoyed his company and asked would he come across again one evening.

'It's a long way,' she said, 'but we could always fix you up with a bed for the night. I think you've made friends with Dad.'

John said that he would, but they were very busy at home, and he was not able to say when. He must hurry back now to relieve the anxiety of his parents.

Nance told him that Mollie was up at the stock-yard. He could see her when he went up to catch his horse.

She was sitting on the top rail of the yard with her back to him, watching Charcoal munching his feed. She was unaware of John's approach till she heard his footsteps on the stony ground. Then she climbed down from her precarious perch.

'Nice morning,' he said for want of some less commonplace expression.

'Is it really? Feeling better again?'

There was a mischievous light in her eyes, and he fancied that she was amusing herself at his obvious embarrassment. He was annoyed that he was unable to find words to express himself. If Charcoal were saddled he might leap on the horse's back and gallop for the shelter of the surrounding timber. How silly that would be. A becoming smile banished the shy expression from his face.

'I want to thank you for pulling me out of the creek yesterday,' he said.

Boyishly, Mollie extended her hand.

'You did that last night,' she said. 'Some people seem to think I should have left you in the creek.' She looked at him directly, appraisingly. 'You know, John Kane,' she said, her eyes dancing, 'if you had another father, we might really be friends.'

'I think we might be friends even with the father I have,' he

replied. 'You can't blame my father for keeping a bigger holding than your people. He was the first settler in the valley and he has a right to it. Besides, he's got a lot more stock than your Dad, and they've got to graze somewhere.'

'Well, we won't quarrel about that,' she said graciously. 'Are you going home now?'

'Yes,' said John. 'There'll be a lot of work to do after the floods, and that terrible father of mine might be worried with his eldest son in the hands of the enemy.'

'True,' she replied. 'He might be afraid of your being contaminated. Now that you've lived with us for a while, what do you really think of us?'

She was a most disarming person. Her eyes were dancing as she asked the question.

'I think you're a very nice family,' John replied, 'and I think you're the nicest member of it.'

Mollie blushed. 'A man in your condition should not talk so much, Mr. Kane,' she said. 'Will you come and see us again, if you're allowed—by your father, I mean?'

John was quick to see the challenge.

'Our parents' disagreements are not ours, Miss Wade,' he said. 'I'll come and see you again, if I may.'

Mollie turned. 'You'll have to ask my father,' she said, as she ran lightly towards the house.

## CHAPTER IX

### THE SETTLEMENT AT WARRAH

It is necessary for the purposes of this narrative to leave the Golden Valley now, and to proceed down over the Wallabadah Mountains, through Warrah, and over the old settlers' route, to Port Stephens and the office of the Colonial Pastoral Company.

In this establishment, Thomas James Hardy sat at his desk,

poring over ledgers, reports and correspondence. The Company's directors had been giving him a bad time of late. The shareholders wanted dividends, and big dividends at that. Maintenance costs were eating into capital, and there was nothing coming back. The Company had plenty of capital and didn't mind expending it on development, but the latest revenue account had shown too much money expended to compensate for, and replace, stock losses. It was all very well to blame droughts and floods and foot rot and other diseases attacking the sheep. But it was no satisfaction to shareholders to be told that natural increases of stock were not sufficient to offset wastage. These people had invested money, and they wanted results. The Company's grant embraced another half-million acres not yet taken up. Hardy was expected to use his knowledge of the colony, and his influence with the authorities, to secure good land and to develop it properly.

Hardy, too, wanted to see results. He was a conscientious manager, and it worried him that the Company's affairs were not progressing as well as they should. But, in addition, he felt some foreboding that if there were not some marked improvement in the near future, his own position might be in danger. A long history of hard and conscientious work and devotion to duty was no answer when the affairs of a public corporation showed signs of declining. The manager was always at fault.

Since Bourke had become Governor of the colony there did not seem to be much sympathy or encouragement for the company coming from Government sources. Under Governor Darling it had been different. But Hardy supposed that they would have to progress with the times, and take things as they found them.

Bourke had approved of the Company's grant at Warrah, but had seemed rather reluctant about it. However, that was something, and should save the sheep. The Golden Valley lands would be the complete answer, but whilst Bourke remained at the head of Government affairs, they seemed to be out of the question. Hardy supposed that he really couldn't blame the Governor for his stand in this matter. There was a principle



involved. The squatters generally had to be encouraged, if the interior lands were to be developed.

His thoughts were interrupted by a knock upon his office door.

'Come in,' he said.

A big, rough-looking fellow entered with his hat in his hand, and a subservient grin upon his broad features.

'Mr. 'Ardy?' he asked, and on being assured on the point, 'William Ruskin's me name,' he said. 'I got some correspondence for yer from Sydney town. I come up be the *Southern Pride* this mornin'.'

Hardy took the extended package and opened it. It contained a letter from the Company's agent in Sydney. Upon Hardy's instructions the agent had advertised in the Government Gazette for candidates for the position of temporary foreman in the services of the Company. The advertisement had been very attractively displayed, but such was the labour position in the colony that only six applications had been received, and there was no outstanding talent amongst them despite the seemingly attractive terms and conditions. Three applicants were not even considered worthy of interview. Of the other three, on interview and record, William Ruskin, the bearer, though not ideal, seemed to be the most satisfactory. The fellow was rough in speech and manner and somewhat uncouth. He had been a convict. The crime for which he had been transported was a bad one, but his record in the colony showed a complete reformation. In fact, whilst still serving his sentence he had received a full pardon for a brave and courageous act which had resulted directly in saving the life of one of His Majesty's officers. He had given most satisfactory services to the Government as an overseer of convicts and was a carpenter by trade. It was with a reasonable amount of confidence that the agent sent him to Port Stephens.

'Why have you sought this position?' asked Hardy. 'I suppose you know that there'll be physical hardships and plenty of hard work.'

'Well, the money's good, Mr. 'Ardy. A lot better than what I been gittin' from the Guv'ment. Then the advertisement

said as 'ow there was a chanct of a good permanent position for the right man. I says to myself as 'ow I might be the right man. That's so, ain't it, Mr. 'Ardy?'

'Don't be too sure of that,' said Hardy. 'As you've been told, my Company has secured a big grant of land at Warrah. That's up in the high country across the Divide from here. We intend to move our sheep from the coast to Warrah and to retain this holding here for cattle breeding only. The first job, and the one for which you've been selected, is to establish a settlement up there. That means a lot of hard work. There'll be a homestead to build, outhouses, sheds and yards, and most of the materials will have to be obtained on the spot. The route from here is a precarious and somewhat dangerous one, and nothing can be taken up except what can go on foot or be carried on pack-horses.'

'When the settlement has been established and the homestead completed a manager will go into residence there. You will have no chance of securing that position. It will go to a free settler, a married man with a family; possibly a manager will be brought out from England. But if you prove yourself, and show ability and loyalty to the Company, I don't doubt that we will be able to find a suitable permanent position for you. That will rest entirely with you. Do you know anything about sheep?'

'I knows a-little. I'm a carpenter be trade, but me ole man 'ad sheep in the ole dart.'

'What were you transported for?'

'Now 'ave a 'cart, Mr. 'Ardy. I s'pose them letters tells yer that. I never done what they reckoned I done. I mean I never done it with malice aforethought like as 'ow they said. An' any'ow, it ain't fair to keep rakin' up a man's past after 'e's reformed an' proved hisself.'

'Very well,' said Hardy, 'I'll take the risk with you. Your references, since you received your pardon, are good. See to it that you live up to them. I'll want you to go back to Sydney and pick up fifteen convict servants who will be assigned to me. As you will be in charge of them, and will be responsible for getting the work out of them, I think you had better try to select them yourself. You can do that, can't you?'

'I think I got sufficient influence with the authorities to get the coves we'll want.'

'All right. You can go back with the *Southern Pride*. I'll have the necessary documents and orders ready for you before the ship sails. I'll put you on the Company's payroll from to-day, but there's no work which you can do between now and sailing time, so you had better have a look around the settlement.'

In due course, Ruskin returned from Sydney with a villainous-looking crew of convict servants. Generally, their records were bad, but they comprised stonemasons, carpenters and shepherds, and Ruskin seemed to have complete control over them.

Hardy decided to go personally with this advance guard of the new settlement, partly because he was not yet prepared to trust his new foreman fully, but principally to select a suitable site for a homestead. The manager was not looking forward to the journey. He was not a bushman, and he hated the thought of the physical discomfort and hardship attendant upon the expedition. He did not know the route, but he knew that the Golden Valley settlers had a defined track over the mountains and down the river valleys, and he had secured the services of a local, civilized native to follow this track for him. Only a small mob of sheep was to go with the party in order not to retard progress too much. The rest would be moved up after the settlement had been established.

Before the expedition set out, Ruskin made a careful check over the stores. He seemed to Hardy to be a methodical fellow, and to take command over his motley crew with complete and unchallenged authority. His inventory complete, he took it to the manager.

'Mr. 'Ardy,' he said, 'I don't want yer to think I'm complainin', but I notice there ain't no rum amongst the supplies. The winter ain't far off, an' a little drop o' rum dished out judicious like on cold nights after a 'ard day's work makes these convict blokes work 'arder the next day, an' keeps 'em contented. The winter nights'll be bleedin' cold up in them hills.'

Hardy agreed, and rum was added to the supplies.

During the slow and arduous journey through the mountains, Hardy studied Ruskin closely, and came to the conclusion that the fellow would be all right. Whilst his ingratiating manner was apt to become a little wearying Hardy felt that he was, in truth, a reformed character and would serve the Company most loyally, in his own interests, if for no other reason.

When, finally, after losing a few sheep and suffering some minor mishaps, the party reached the location of the Company's grant, a homestead site was selected in a small, high valley where there was what appeared to be permanent water and ample, heavy hardwood timber for building purposes in close proximity. Hardy had drawn plans for the homestead and Ruskin followed them without difficulty. The foundations of the building were to be of stone, and the structure itself of rough-hewn, hardwood slabs with a shingle roof. Sheep-yards were to be constructed on the mortised post-and-rail principle. The little stream was to be earth-dammed in case the water supply should fail in a dry season. Tents were pitched on this spot, and on the day following the arrival of the party, Ruskin set the men to work.

Hardy stayed with them for two days to satisfy himself that everything was being properly done. Then he called Ruskin aside for final instructions and, before he finished, he told the foreman of the settlers in the Golden Valley.

'There are three squatter groups up there across that mountain range,' he said. 'Some of them come down to Port Stephens occasionally for supplies or to bring down fat stock or hides. They come through this district. I want you to be on good neighbourly terms with them. To be quite frank, I have hopes of one day getting the land which they occupy for an extension of this holding. They are all doing well and making money, from what I can see, but I think it possible that they might one day be prepared to sell their stock and improvements to the Company at valuation, with a fair addition for goodwill. As a matter of fact, their land would be worth so much to the Company, and would return such a quick income to us, that we could afford to pay them sufficient to make them independent for life. But they are very touchy people. I will leave it to you, in

your own time, to cultivate their friendship and to sound them out judiciously.'

'Jist where are they sitiuated, Mr. 'Ardy?' asked Ruskin.

'I'm not sure, precisely. I am not on the best of terms with them. But you shouldn't have much difficulty in finding them. There's a Cornishman named Kane and his family, an Englishman named Wade and his son and daughters, and an Irish chap named O'Callaghan, who runs a small station on his own.'

'O'Callaghan,' said Ruskin. 'Would that be Martin O'Callaghan? He's an old friend o' mine. I heered he had a cattle station up thisaway somewheres.'

'That's the man,' said Hardy.

'I'll take me time an' do what I can,' Ruskin said.

'Good man. If you're successful there'll be a handsome commission for you and that permanent position which we spoke about will be secured. But don't rush things. And if you should make a bargain with all or any of them I will want to know the figure before you finally commit the Company. But I can assure you that if it comes to a point, we are prepared to pay big money. My Company is not out to rob anybody.'

After telling Ruskin that he would expect progress reports on the development of the settlement from time to time, Hardy took the native guide with him and began his return journey.

Ruskin went back to his job, driving the poor convicts as though they were still in the chain-gangs in Sydney. The men were his own selection, but they were not friends or cronies. Generally he had looked for weak-willed, cowed fellows who would work hard and give him the least possible trouble. And he had told them frightful stories of what would happen to them should they disobey orders or attempt to escape. They were going out to the interior. There would be no guards over them because that was not necessary; they would have to stay with him for their own personal safety. There were wild animals in the northern bush country—great man-eating kangaroos and tiger cats who climbed trees and leaped upon their prey from the branches at night. And the natives there were not like those on the coast, they were savage cannibals and head hunters. A bunch of them had been known to eat a man and

his horse in one meal. The country, too, once you got off the tracks, abounded with venomous snakes and pythons. So once the party reached the inland mountains, only a man with suicidal tendencies would attempt to escape.

After the day's work was over, Ruskin went to his own tent and ate his meal; then he poured himself out a liberal nobbler of rum. 'Martin O'Callaghan, eh?' he ruminated. 'So you're up there over the mountains! I reckon I'll see *you* afore I goes back, if I see none other. Not bad bleedin' rum, Mr. 'Ardy. "Givin' up murderin' an' takin' to torture as a more profitable business," he says, aye. I'll see *you*, me Irish bucko, afore I goes back.' Ruskin helped himself to another rum. 'So you'll pay them squatters well for their land, eh, Mr. 'Ardy; an' you'll give Bill Ruskin a liberal commission. You don't want Bill Ruskin for a manager, do you? No, yer want a free settler. No murderers for you. You'll give Bill Ruskin a liberal commission, an' a permanent position. Like bleedin' 'ell, you will. I'm boss up here now. I got fifteen men, an' rifles an' plenty ammunition. An' I got plenty rum. Yer might git them lands up there for your bleedin' Company, Mr. 'Ardy. Yer might, I says. Yer prepared to pay plenty sterlin' for 'em. Well, if you does you'll pay Bill Ruskin a plenty bleedin' sight more. You'll pay 'im enough to get out o' this bleedin' country and back to the old dart, where a man can live like a 'uman bein', that I'll warrant yer.'

## CHAPTER X

### OFFERS OF PURCHASE

JOHN KANE was the object of much solicitude when he reached home. Mary wanted him to go to bed for a few days. His father suggested that O'Callaghan should be sent for—Joe always maintained that Martin was as good as most doctors, and better than some. But John insisted that he was completely recovered

and quite fit. Still, to satisfy his parents, he agreed to take things quietly for a day or so.

Whilst his father was present very few questions were asked, and little was said about the people at Wade's; but when alone with his mother, Mary Kane plied him with questions. Did he see Martin's fiancée? What was she like? Did he think that she was good enough for Martin? And so on.

Since the death of Alice Carlisle, Mary Kane had craved for female company. She had never admitted this longing, even to herself; but being the wife of a settler in this secluded country was a lonely life for a woman. To hear John talk now so enthusiastically of Nance and Mollie Wade, their appearance and how they were dressed and what they said, made her realize how much she longed for the companionship of her own sex.

John told her of the invitation which the girls had given him to visit the family again and, somewhat wistfully, she agreed that it would be a great thing for him.

'But I wouldn't tell your father, if I were you, John,' she said. 'Leave it to me and I'll gradually bring him around to agree to your going. Perhaps you'll be the means of putting us all on visiting terms before long. Wouldn't that be grand?'

John agreed wholeheartedly. He rested at home for a couple of days as his mother had asked him to do, and then his thoughts and energies were devoted to assisting with clearing up the aftermath of the flood. There were motherless calves to be found and suckled, drowned stock to be skinned and the carcasses burned. There were hides to be dried and tanned, and then a check of stock to be made to ascertain, roughly, what losses had been incurred. Fortunately, the removal of the cattle from the lower flats shortly before the heavy rains had kept casualties to a low figure; but a number of strays had been drowned, nevertheless.

All this took time, and social visiting for John, for the present, was out of the question.

Just after tea one evening, Martin O'Callaghan rode in. He too had been busy, but he owed his neighbours a call, and hoped that they could find a bed for him for the night. He was the bearer of news of some importance. It would appear that the

Golden Valley settlers now had neighbours—that the Colonial Pastoral Company was establishing a settlement upon its grant at Warrah. Some of the natives had told O'Callaghan about it. Apparently, the people had been there for some time. There were a number of workmen there, and some sheep, and a large and permanent-looking homestead was under construction.

'What do you make of it, Cal?' asked Joe Kane. 'No danger for us, I suppose.'

'None in the least. We've got the whole of the Wallabadah Mountains between our holdings. I knew the Company would settle up this way eventually—they need the high country for their sheep. Hardy told me that the Warrah grant had been approved. Admittedly, they have a proper title to their new holding, whilst we are still, legally, only squatters. But I'm sure we have nothing to fear here.'

'They'll be across our track to Port Stephens, though, Cal. And none of us get on very well with those people. Supposing they cut us off from the Port?'

'They wouldn't do that. They'd have no reason to. And even if they did, we could find another route. But all that's by the way. What I really came to see you about, Joe, was to discuss a project which Alex Wade put into my mind. Do you know that young heifers are bringing twenty pounds a head in Sydney?'

'I didn't know until John told me that you saw some sold at that figure.'

'Well, Wade suggests that the Newcastle market should be nearly as good, and he proposes to try to get down there with a mob. I think the idea's sound and am considering joining him with some of mine. How does the scheme appeal to you?'

Joe thought that the idea had possibilities, but there were some serious faults in it. If the settlers were not careful, they could easily deplete their own breeding stock, already reduced somewhat by the flood. And if heifers were worth so much to other settlers, wouldn't they also have the same value to retain? Then there was the hazard of getting the stock to Newcastle over a



route which would have to be blazed, at least for a great part of the way. And the time factor. So many men would be required to drive the stock that the stations would be understaffed for quite a lengthy period.

O'Callaghan agreed that there were difficulties, but he had thought the whole thing over most carefully. He suggested not more than a hundred head from each holding. In his opinion, breeding cattle were not as valuable to the established settlers on the outback stations as they were to new migrants. There was a boom now, and the inflated values would not last. High prices were due to the rapid influx of new settlers securing grants, and looking for breeding stock. With regard to manpower, O'Callaghan suggested that he would go himself, and that two men from Wade's and two from Kane's should be sufficient to do the job. The route would be difficult, but not as bad as Joe imagined. There were settlers on the Upper Hunter now, and once that territory were reached there would be no difficulty in getting down to Newcastle. O'Callaghan told Joe that he would have plenty of time to consider the proposal. He estimated that the expedition would take about three weeks on the down journey, and he thought it should set out in about a fortnight's time when the weather would be getting a bit cooler. Kane agreed to think it over. John would ride out on the morrow and get an idea of what saleable heifers were available on the holding.

Their routes, for the first few miles, being in the same direction, John and O'Callaghan, on the next day, set out together. As they rode they spoke of the Wades. O'Callaghan had been told of John's accident, and of his overnight stay at the homestead. O'Callaghan did not hesitate to tell John that the young man had made a great impression upon the Wade family, and John was overjoyed.

Soon O'Callaghan left him. John spent the morning examining cattle on the southern and western sections of his father's holding. Nearing Wade's boundary, in the early afternoon, he saw Alex Wade riding by and shouted to him. Alex crossed over and inquired if John had completely recovered. Then John suggested that they should bail the billy and have a bite

to eat, which they did. John told Alex what he was doing, and indicated that co-operation in the proposal for a joint droving of heifers to Newcastle might be forthcoming. Alex was immensely pleased.

'I would send Ogilvie and Svortzen,' he said. 'I suppose you would go, and your station hand.'

John agreed that the set-up would be something like that. Then, hesitantly, he turned the conversation to reveal something of his interest in Mollie. Wade took it quietly.

'I suspected something like this eventually, young man,' he said. 'And I want to tell you, here and now, that although I've got no time for your father, I like the go of you. But Mollie's little more than a child yet, and hasn't seen much of life. I won't discourage you, but I wouldn't like you to pay her too much attention for a while. Her sister's getting married next year. We'll all be going to Sydney then, and I've been thinking of asking you to come with us. In fact Martin made the suggestion. Bill was to be his groomsman, but that's not decided. Martin would rather give you the job, and has been more or less waiting for me to agree before asking you. I'm agreeing now. You get your father to spare you for a few weeks next autumn and it'll be settled. That'll give you and Mollie plenty of chance to get to know each other. How does that suit?'

It suited very well. John had been extremely nervous about broaching the subject of Mollie with her father. He had expected resistance, but this was tantamount to a paternal blessing. He was on top of the world as he rode away, particularly as Wade had told him that he would be welcome to come and see the family sometimes, should he care to do so.

John was riding homeward along the southern boundary, dreaming the most pleasant of dreams, when a horseman broke through the timber and came towards him. A stranger, John noted to his amazement—the first he had seen in the valley since Major Mitchell had passed through three years before. A big, powerful man on a great chestnut mare. His face was somewhat bloated and a few dirty red locks strayed over a broad low forehead beneath a soiled, wide-brimmed hat.

'Good day, young feller,' the stranger said, as the two riders drew abreast. 'Is this 'ere the brook yer call Yaller Crick?'

John replied that it was.

'Well, there's a feller be the name o' Wade—a squatter—livin' somewheres round 'ere. Know anythin' abart 'im?'

'I know where he lives,' replied John. 'but he's not at home now, and you'll have a job to find him, not knowing the country. Do you want to see him urgently?'

'Well, no. Not particular. I'm doin' a bit of grazin' meself, down Warrah way, if y'understand; an' I thought I'd pay a little friendly visit. You work for Wade?'

'No,' replied John. 'My name's Kane. My dad's got a holding up towards the head of the river. What's your name?'

'Ruskin, Bill Ruskin, at yer service. I'm not really a squatter. I'm managin' *pro tem* as the sayin' is, for the Colonial Pastoral Company. I come up from Sydney Town.'

'Ruskin's your name,' said John. 'Do you know a man named Martin O'Callaghan?'

'Never heard o' him in me life. At least not until Mr. 'Ardy told me the names of me next-door neighbours.'

John was relieved. The name must be a coincidence. Ruskin suggested that if he couldn't see Mr. Wade he would like to make the acquaintance of the Kane family, and if John were riding home, he would like nothing better than to accompany him. John agreed. He didn't like this fellow, and had no desire for his company, but he didn't want the stranger to visit the Wade homestead while Alex was away.

Ruskin endeavoured to make himself an interesting companion, chatting affably about the conditions of the country and the stock which they passed at intervals. He asked numerous questions about the settlers in the valley, and received carefully guarded answers.

Joe Kane and Mary met them at the stock-yard. John introduced his companion, who dismounted and stood respectfully by his horse, his hat in his hand.

'Pleased to meet you, Mr. Ruskin,' Joe said, but he looked anything but pleased. 'I only heard last night that your

Company had settled a branch at Warrah. You're going in for sheep, I suppose.'

'Yes. We been up here a while. Bein' the manager o' the place, an' bein' naturally friendly and courteous, I thought as 'ow I'd pay a little friendly call on me neighbours.'

Joe invited him in for a cup of tea and a bite to eat. While he was out washing his hands, Mary said that she didn't like the look of the fellow, and she thought he smelt of stale rum. Joe agreed, but you had to show some hospitality. Ruskin talked animatedly about the Colonial Pastoral Company. From his own personal knowledge of the Company's history, Joe knew that many of the fellow's observations were untrue. Joe mentally documented his visitor as a liar, and probably a scoundrel. Then Ruskin said he would have to go.

'It's bleedin' rough country to be travellin' through in the dark, ain't it?' he said. 'You got a tidy bunch o' cattle round 'ere, Mr. Kane. What d'yer reckon they'd be worth?'

Joe had no idea.

'You ain't got any title to yer land, 'ave yer?'

Joe was getting a little angry at this questioning.

'I think you'd better state your business,' he said. 'What have you got in the back of your mind?'

The directness of this question took Ruskin off his guard.

'Well, yer see,' he said, 'I got authority to offer yer a pretty tidy figure for yer cattle an' improvements if I thought there was ever any chance o' you wantin' to take yer family back to the town.'

Ruskin paused, as he noted the expression on Joe's face.

'There ain't no cause to be annoyed,' he said, 'I'm only makin' a business suggestion. Think it over quiet like, an' I'll come an' see you again one day.'

Ruskin was mounting as he said this.

'Think it over!' shouted Joe. 'You get to hell off my property and don't show your dirty face on it again. That's my answer to you and your blasted Company. Now get going before I use a stock-whip on you.'

Ruskin's manner changed. His face grew horrible in its livid fury and his bulging eyes strayed to the rifle in his saddle

sheath. He hesitated, cursed loudly, then wheeled his horse and galloped away.

He rode furiously for a mile or so, and then slowed down and took a swig of rum from a pocket flask. He cursed himself roundly for his impetuosity. Obviously, he couldn't approach Kane again on friendly terms. Kane was a bad man to deal with, anyhow. You could see the suspicious look in his face all the time you were talking. Wade might be different. But he'd have to see Wade quickly, before the two squatters got their heads together. If he could get Wade to agree to sell he'd make Hardy pay a higher price than Wade asked, and he'd pocket the difference as well as the commission. That wouldn't be a bad start. Then he could stock Wade's holding with sheep and that would give Kane and O'Callaghan something to worry about. The first drought would make them glad to sell out cheap. Sheep were closer croppers than cattle, and would thrive where the larger animals would starve. They'd eat the whole valley out if he could persuade Hardy to send up enough of 'em. Anyhow he would have to try Wade now before Kane could do any talking.

He cursed again as he noted the position of the sun, and decided to make a camp. He didn't know how far he had to go to reach Wade's place, but he wasn't going to ride through the bush at night. He knew that Yellow Creek eventually would lead him to Wade's. He would follow the rest of it in daylight.

Ruskin hated the bush at night. He recalled the stories with which he had frightened the convicts, and almost believed some of them. The dingo's eerie, mournful howl struck him like the wail of a lost soul. No murdered woman ever screamed as fearfully as that screech-owl shrieked. Ruskin turned to his bottle of rum and drank himself to sleep.

He rode on to Wade's place in the early morning, hoping to catch the settler at home. Alex appeared in the doorway as the stranger approached. Ruskin introduced himself as Mr. Taylor, and was invited inside. His story was precisely that which he had related to Kane, but he approached his objective more guardedly.

'Mr. Wade,' he said over a cup of tea, 'ave yer ever thought o' what a great proposition it'd be ter work up a holdin' like this o' yourn, an' sell it to the 'ighest bidder; an' then go away somewhere an' work up another?'

'Well,' Wade replied in his slow drawl, 'that would be all right if a man owned the property. But I've got no title, so it's no use thinking about that.'

'No, but yer could easy sell yer rights—like a kind o' goodwill. What I mean, yer could sell yer stock, an' if yer could find some chappie with a hinterest in the valley—say Mr. Kane, f'rinstance—a feller who might want to get 'old of a bit more o' the country, yer could get a pretty tidy figure in return for yer leavin' the valley.'

Alex jumped to his feet and struck his fist upon the table.

'Did Kane tell you he had that in mind?' he asked.

Ruskin puzzled this out. There was enmity between the two squatters, apparently. This was a new factor on which he had stumbled by accident. He might be able to turn this to his advantage.

'Kane did mention somethin' about it in a talk we was havin', ' he lied glibly. 'I didn't mean ter tell yer that, though. It ain't none o' my business.'

Alex studied him intently, suspiciously.

'Did Kane have anything else to say on the subject?' he asked.

'Well, if you insist on knowin', Mr. Wade, he did say as 'ow you an' 'im wasn't what you'd call good friends. An' he give me the impression that if he couldn't buy you out—an' he didn't seem ter think there was much chanct o' that—he was hopin ter get a grant ter cover his holdin' an' yourn as well.'

Wade sank heavily into his chair, an expression of mingled despair and fury clouding his bronzed features.

'Joe Kane never forgave me for coming here and settlin in this valley,' he said, 'and he won't be satisfied until I'm gone; but if he's going to get rid of me, by hell he'll pay, and pay handsomely.'

This was Ruskin's chance, and he seized upon it. 'Mr. Wade,' he said, 'if you're goin' ter sell, don't deal with that mongrel Kane. I know 'im. I knew 'im in Sydney, an' he

ain't no good. Give me a option if yer like. The Colonial Pastoral Company's got plenty o' money, an' they'll pay 'andsomely. I could take a option in their name. They'd honour it. What d'yer reckon?'

Wade was engrossed in his thoughts, and beyond a muttered word of thanks, did not reply. Ruskin took advantage of the silence to study the effect of his proposal on the other occupants of the room. He was particularly anxious to get the two girls on his side, but he could not read their faces.

'Yer know, Miss Wade—both Miss Wades,' he said, 'I just come up recent from Sydney Town, an' it's a fine place for ladies. There's plenty o' eligible army officers there, an' plenty amusements an' fine clothes ter buy when yer got money an——'

He was looking at Nance and the expression in her eyes halted him. Nance rose and went over to her father.

'Dad,' she said, 'Mr. Taylor, if that is his name which I doubt, is a liar, a cheat and a scoundrel. It is he who is trying to take our station from us, not Mr. Kane. His precious Company is trying to get title to the Golden Valley, but the Governor has refused to grant it to them. I know that's the truth. Martin told me. That's why he left us some time ago and went to Sydney. This fellow here is trying to do, by underhand means, what cannot be done legally. And I'm sure he doesn't properly represent the Colonial Pastoral Company. They couldn't give authority to such an obvious scoundrel.'

Ruskin's ungovernable temper took control of him, and he leaped across the room to silence the girl. Wade and Abo grappled with him and took him outside to his horse. He felt a little afraid of the furious men who were handling him, and was glad of the opportunity to escape them. But once on his horse, he became bolder, and as he rode past the door he hurled a torrent of threats and abuse at the girl who had exposed him.

A deep hush fell over the household as the ex-convict's shouts rang through the timber. The peace of the valley had been shattered. To the settlers it seemed that war had been declared. The homestead was enveloped in an atmosphere of gloomy

foreboding, which even Abo's caustic remarks and Svortzen's humorous epithets could not dispel.

Alex Wade sent Bill riding over to O'Callaghan's homestead with a request for Martin to come as soon as possible. The Irishman returned with Bill in the evening. The family was gathered in the dining-room when Alex told the story of their visitor. Martin's face was grave.

'Is this fellow Taylor a native born?' he asked.

Alex was about to answer but Abo forestalled him.

'Native,' he said, with disgust. 'Hell, no. He's got a naccident you could cut with a crorst-cut saw.'

'He must be a recent addition to the Company's staff then,' said O'Callaghan. 'I can't remember anyone by that name connected with them. I think I'll pay him a visit.'

'What can you gain by that?' asked Alex.

'I can find out what's going on. I wouldn't be at all surprised at the Company trying to buy you out, Alex. It is a logical thing, because those people badly need this country. But they wouldn't stoop to dishonest tactics such as you had this morning. They wouldn't be so mean as to try to capitalize on a squabble between two settlers. With all his faults, Hardy's straight enough. I think your visitor is playing some game on his own, and I am going to find out what it is.'

Nance packed O'Callaghan's saddle-bags for him before the Irishman set out next morning for Warrah.

'Do you think there is any danger, Martin?' she asked as she bade him good-bye.

'Danger of what, Nance?'

'I don't know,' she replied, 'but that man's face haunted me all night. He's bad, Martin. You can see it when he looks at you. Be careful—for my sake—won't you?'

O'Callaghan promised, and told her to look out for him in a couple of days.

When the sun rose over Mulla Mountain O'Callaghan was five miles from the homestead, riding hard south along the Port Stephens track. He crossed the Wallabadahs and saw, in the distance, the beginnings of the new Warrah station. The proposed homestead was certainly close to the Golden Valley.



It was being constructed on the northern fringe of the Warrah district, and was separated from the valley only by the mountain range. From the tip of a ridge, sheltered from observation by a clump of scrub wattle, he examined the settlement. A row of white tents nestled in a small valley, high up on the southern slope of the Wallabadahs. A number of men—tiny figures at such a distance—moved about, apparently preparing their midday meal. The green slopes around the encampment were dotted with miniature white specks—the initial sheep flocks of the new settlement.

O'Callaghan remained at his vantage point, resting and watching operations. At sundown he began to edge his way down the slopes of the Wallabadahs, taking advantage of the excellent cover provided by the timber to shield him from the eyes of the people at Warrah. He had decided to call upon Mr. Taylor under cover of darkness; for the foreman might be smarting still from his treatment at Wade's homestead, and there might be open hostility. O'Callaghan did not expect anything serious, but should the worst happen, his intimate knowledge of the country would assist him to evade the new settlers.

An hour after sundown O'Callaghan emerged from the sparse box scrub surrounding the newly made clearing in which the Company's tents had been pitched. The barking of a sheep-dog heralded his approach. Before its warning could be appreciated by the inmates of the camp the squatter had reached the foremost and largest of the canvas dwellings.

'Who's there?' growled a deep voice from within. 'What in the bleedin' 'ell are yer doin', Johnson, gallopin' round the bleedin' camp this time o' night?'

O'Callaghan recognized the voice.

'It's not Johnson,' he said quietly. 'It's a visitor from up north. I want a word with the manager of this establishment.'

A muttered oath was the only retort. Then Ruskin pushed through the flap and confronted the intruder.

'Well,' he asked sullenly. 'What yer want?'

'Good evening, Mr. Taylor,' said O'Callaghan. 'I called on you to give you a piece of good advice, Ruskin. I don't

know how you secured the position of manager of this settlement, and I don't want to know. I'll warrant you told some precious lies to get it, and that you're more interested in yourself than the good of your masters. But I came to warn you to keep out of the Golden Valley. There's nothing for you there. What your schemes are, I don't know, but whatever they are, you can develop them south of the Wallabadahs. If you show your face north of those mountains again I'll expose you to Mr. Hardy for the utter scoundrel which I know you to be.'

The darkness hid the look of rage and mortification with which Ruskin's features were convulsed. The man's reply, however, was by no means in harmony with his feelings.

'I didn't mean no bleedin' 'arm,' he said. 'I was only carryin' out instructions.'

But the appearance of some of his men, drawn from the adjacent tents by the sound of voices, emboldened him and he changed his tone.

'Any'ow, there ain't no call fer you to come rampagin' round 'ere. This 'ere's a free country, this is. I got a right ter go where I like, ain't I? If I want ter go inter yer bleedin' valley, by the Lord 'Arry I'll go there, won't I?'

The rising moon illuminated the grimy, bewhiskered faces of Ruskin's underlings, assembled in curiosity behind their foreman. O'Callaghan took them in at a glance. 'Convicts all,' he told himself. 'I'll wager they're great friends of Ruskin.'

He ignored the foreman's reply.

'Remember what I told you, Ruskin,' he said, 'and remember also that the Golden Valley is not a safe place for you. Keep south of the mountain range and you'll keep out of trouble.'

O'Callaghan lost no time in putting a safe distance between himself and the camp. A few miles north and he drew rein to find if he had been followed. He heard the metallic sound of horseshoes ringing on stone, but the rider was somewhere west of him and travelling south. Apparently one of the Warrah men was going home from sheep-tending; so the squatter dismissed the incident and pushed on.

After he had commenced the northern descent of the range, the Irishman decided to give his mount a rest for an hour or so, and a drink at a spring which he knew to be in the vicinity. The morning star was visible when he resumed his journey. He had to deviate a little from the track to avoid a heap of boulders and as he did so, his horse pricked its ears suspiciously, then came to a complete halt and refused to move.

## CHAPTER XI

### THE TOTEM LAWS

PEERING through the darkness O'Callaghan searched the long grass immediately in front of his horse. Then he dismounted and tied the animal to a tree. A further examination of what had appeared to be an outcrop of dark rock brought an exclamation of surprise to his lips. It was a dead steer, and there were more further on. O'Callaghan rolled the carcass over, feeling carefully over the hide to try to find the cause of death. His hand encountered something hard protruding from the dead beast's abdomen. He drew it out, and held it up against the sky.

'A spear, all right,' he muttered, 'and a Moonbi job, too. That stringy-bark shaft came from the northern mountains, I'll take a look at the others.'

There were five carcasses in all, strewn along the track, and each beast had been pierced by a spear. O'Callaghan examined the ground and found that this spot had been used as a camp by a herd of Wade's cattle for some time. The bodies of the animals were still warm.

O'Callaghan decided that he must have surprised the blacks before they could cut any meat from the cattle, but he couldn't imagine Bru Bri permitting this to happen. Then a frightening thought struck him. Perhaps Biraban had died after all.

The squatter lead his horse past the bodies of the steers, then mounted and rode rapidly down the mountainside. Heedless of the broken country and dangerous timber, he galloped northward. What if Biraban had died as a result of his wounds and the Moonbi chief had commenced his terrible programme of retribution? Would Bru Bri begin with the stock and end with the human inhabitants, or would he begin his campaign by attempting to exterminate the white people? O'Callaghan thought that the chief would take the former course. At least he hoped so, and that he would be in time to save his friends from destruction.

He was on Yellow Creek now, racing across the more even country in the pale light of early dawn, his horse streaked with foam flecks, yet bravely maintaining the pace. A golden glow above Mulla Mountain heralded the rising sun as Wade's homestead came into view. Wade was out at the stock-yard feeding his horses, and O'Callaghan sighed with relief. He told Wade what he had discovered—something which completely overshadowed the threat of Ruskin to the south. But O'Callaghan was fatigued and he slept until lunch-time.

When he awakened he and Wade discussed this new and frightening development. The spearing of cattle meant war. Obviously Biraban had died, in which case Bru Bri was no longer a friend of the white people. Bru Bri would know that the slaughtered cattle had been discovered, and that the settlers would now be on the defensive. Therefore, he would not attack until the white people became careless. O'Callaghan felt that if he could obtain knowledge of the natives' plans it might be possible to take the offensive, and so avoid having to combat the patient game of waiting and clever subterfuge which Bru Bri would employ. He decided, therefore, to go back in daylight to the scene of the outrage and try to pick up the tracks of the natives, and thereby locate their war camp.

He borrowed a fresh horse from Wade, who accompanied him to the stock-yard.

'I'll come with you, Cal,' Alex said.

'No,' replied O'Callaghan. 'This is a one-man job.'

Besides, you should remain here in case there is any trouble. I've not told Nance what's going on. I wouldn't alarm the girls at this stage, if I were you.'

Wade agreed, and O'Callaghan set out alone, reaching the scene of the outrage some two hours before sundown. Dingoes had been feeding on the dead cattle during the early morning, and eagle-hawks were feasting there when he arrived. He drew a spear from the body of a big beast and studied the weapon curiously. He wasn't so sure now that it was a Moonbi job. In fact, there were rough knife marks upon the shaft, which made the squatter wonder if indeed it were of aboriginal manufacture at all. Some six feet or more in length, the weapon had been made of green timber with the point fire-hardened after the usual fashion.

O'Callaghan turned to one of the other animals, one which had not been torn so much by dogs. The carcass was bloated and swollen, and the embedded spear was not in a position where it could have caused death. This wasn't the work of natives. The animals had been poisoned, and the spears driven in after death.

The squatter looked for tracks and discovered the imprints of a horse's hoofs in a patch of soft earth about a hundred yards south from the spot where his horse had rebelled on the previous night, and a little way off the main Port Stephens track. Then he remembered the sound of a horseman passing him near Warrah, which he had mistaken for the noise of a shepherd returning late.

It looked as though Ruskin were planning to force the settlers into open warfare with the natives. An attack upon the blacks would be the logical consequence of the discovery of a number of speared cattle.

It was dark when O'Callaghan reached Wade's homestead. Nance was at the stock-yard to meet him. They went inside the house and Alex and the others joined them.

'There's nothing to fear from the natives, Alex,' O'Callaghan said, 'but your friend Mr. Taylor is a fraud. He's one of the greatest scoundrels that this country has known. His real name is Ruskin.'

'I knew it,' said Nance. 'I recognized him from what you have told me of him.'

'Well, he's in charge at Warrah all right; but I fancy he's only a temporary foreman. The Company has a gang of convict servants engaged on construction work. Mr. Ruskin is driving the poor fellows very hard, from what I have been able to observe. I have no doubt that, when the buildings have been completed, he'll be taken away and our real neighbours will arrive. I can't quite understand how Hardy could have commissioned the fellow to bargain with you, Alex. But he's most plausible at times, and it is possible that he has taken Hardy in completely.'

Nance wanted to know why O'Callaghan had not mentioned his discovery during the morning, instead of riding off so mysteriously. O'Callaghan explained, and told of the greatest piece of villainy of all—the poisoning of the cattle.

'I'd kill the b—— mongrel, I would,' said Abo. 'We oughter go down to Warrah and wipe out the whole b—— mob of 'em. Sorry, ladies. But they're up to no b—— good. I never seen a convict yet as wasn't a no-good b—— mongrel, an' I been forty-five years among 'em.' Abo cast a sly glance at O'Callaghan. 'Blow all their b—— heads off, that's what I say.'

Each member of the household had a suggestion to make, but O'Callaghan thought that, for the time being, no serious action should be taken.

'Ruskin knows now that he has been recognized, and that he can do no good for himself here,' he said. 'I think I frightened him a little, so let's forget him.'

It was decided, nevertheless, that O'Callaghan's cattle should be moved on to Wade's holding for the time being so that the homestead's complement in manpower could be increased. By sundown on the following day this task had been completed, and the Irishman's cattle were browsing contentedly, knee deep in the luxurious grasses which now flanked Yellow Creek.

During the following days a quiet peace came over the valley. O'Callaghan spent these days riding casually about the holding, and the tranquil evenings in the company of his

fiancée. It was on one of these evenings that O'Callaghan and Nance took a stroll together along the banks of Yellow Creek. The sky was glittering with faultless stars and before them the great Cross of the South hung emblazoned in sparkling gold. Beneath their feet was a verdant carpet of grass patterned with multi-coloured bush flowers.

As they walked they spoke of many things—of their future, and of the difficulties confronting them, to be overcome by the strength of their love for each other. At length they found a grassy bank and sat down to rest.

'Biraban's a strange creature, Martin,' said Nance. 'You know, he wouldn't stay with us for a moment after he could get on to his feet. The young man wasn't really fit to travel when he left us. I was awfully worried. When you saw those dead cattle did you really think he had died?'

'For a time I did. But there wasn't really any need for you to have been worried about him. The natives up here have extraordinary recuperative powers. Whereas we civilized people need our beds to recover from injury or illness, the blacks appear to do better roaming the bush. You know, a native mother can bear a child in the morning and do her routine work in the camp in the evening.'

'But surely many of them must die.'

'True, but not as great a proportion as one might expect. The strenuous lives which these people have led for centuries have bred a strong and hardy race. This breeding has been aided by their tribal customs and totem laws, which make marriage between relatives impossible.'

Nance knew that Martin loved the dusky natives and she thrilled to hear him speak of them.

'Martin,' she asked, 'can any white person really understand those totem laws?'

O'Callaghan pondered this a moment.

'The difficulty, Nance,' he said, 'is that there are very few natives who fully understand them; yet all aborigines observe them to the letter. When a young native is initiated to manhood the medicine men tell him the directions in which he is not free to seek a mate. That's all that he knows. In fact it's

all that he needs to know. Bru Bri told me a story one time which illustrates the sanctity of these laws. Whether it's true history, or only tribal legend, I don't know, but I fancy it's legend. Would you like to hear it?'

Nance left him in no doubt.

'As far as I can remember it,' he said, 'I'll try to recount it as Bru Bri gave it to me.

'Now, according to Bru Bri, all this happened a long, long time ago, when there was a terrible drought which threatened the Moonbi branch of the Kamilaroi tribes with extinction. As Bru Bri put it, it was the season when Baiame, the Great Master who built the mountains and the watercourses, and who makes the grass grow green in the valleys and the rain come pouring down from the Warrambool—it was the season when Baiame grew very angry with the black people. He dried up the streams and shut the flood-gates of Heaven to impress the black men with his power, and to punish them for breaking his laws. On the purple tops of the Moonbis the pale green of the wattles turned to brown and the box and wild apple swayed in the burning wind, their leaves wilted and thirsting for water. Even in the valley of the river, where kangaroos were wont to feed on the luxuriant herbage, the land had become a barren carpet of long dry grass. Kumbo Piriwal, the wise old chief of the Moonbi tribe, ordered the young warriors to scatter in search of sustenance, for the game had vanished from the hungry Moonbis.

'Where the river empties out on the great plains to the westward, its waters meet with other streams and the grass grows sweet, even under the blazing sun. Murri Duli, son of Kumbo Piriwal, and called the Iguana after his mother, knew that green grass betokened abundance of game. Murri Duli was a hunter, a warrior and a brave man. Once, before the Cora had given him his manhood, he had roamed the great plains to the westward. He would go again, seeking food for his father's people. So when the moon hung low over the Moonbis, Murri Duli took his spears, his womerah and his boomerang, and sped from the hungry camp of his people towards the resting place of Punnal—the sun.



'Three times had the moon jumped up and sat down before Murri Duli walked into the camp of the Walaroi, a kindred tribe, known to be friendly. The young warrior had found grass in abundance on the plains. His stomach had tasted the fresh, sweet meat of the kangaroo. He found the Walaroi tribesmen well fed and contented. They welcomed Murri Duli, and fed him and bade him rest. Their council of chiefs and medicine men agreed that the women and children of the Kamilaroi from the Moonbis, and their old men, should be permitted to enter the Walaroi hunting-grounds, and to remain there until Baiame grew gentle again and set the storm-clouds gathering over the Moonbi Mountains.

'Murri Duli was speaking to the council, thanking the chiefs for their kindness, when he caught a glimpse of a face peering from the shadows beyond the light of the council fires. A fleeting glance—a beautiful face, and a pair of enchanting eyes that shone like the big moon shines at night from the depths of the water-holes in the Moonbis.

'Must have been eyes somewhat like yours, Nance.'

'Go on with the story, Martin, please.'

'The young man carried with him a haunting picture of loveliness as his long, loping strides bore him swiftly away towards the camp of his people, and his heart grew sad with yearning. In the tree tops a mopoke called, then left its perch with a flutter of wings as its plaintive cry was answered from afar. Murri Duli slackened his pace, paused a moment in the moonlight, then turned and slipped into the shadows and moved softly back towards the river.'

'When Ippatha Bilba, peering from the shelter of a timber clump outside the gunyahs of the *inargungs*, saw the handsome young man leave the council fire, the soreness of her heart disturbed her. She sat beneath the gum trees dreaming of his grace and beauty, of the soft melody of his voice and of the wisdom of his words. The sound of a breaking twig aroused her. Perhaps it was only a 'possum tearing a piece of bark as he clawed his way to a tree top. But a swift glance behind her brought the hot blood rushing to her dusky cheeks. For the smiling young warrior of the council fire stood in the

moonlight, watching her. Ippatha Bilba turned to run, but her feet seemed glued to the dewy grass. She tried to scream, to speak, to tell him to go away, but terror held her stupefied. The young man smiled again, then slowly advanced towards her. His hands rested on her shoulders. Her spirit joined with his and she thrilled to the soft melody of his crooning voice. In bewildered gladness she returned the warrior's embrace.

'Kumbo Piriwal, chief of the Moonbi tribe of the Kamilaroi, rose from his haunches before his gunyah and sniffed the mountain air. A light of expectation filled his sunken eyes; for the wind brought the scent of man and the sweet odour of fresh-killed kangaroo. The old man turned his face to the breeze and gazed down the rocky gully. The lithe, graceful figure of Murri Duli was unmistakable, even in the shimmering distance, but a woman loped behind him, carrying the carcass of a kangaroo. Kumbo Piriwal was puzzled. With a grunt he squatted on a rock to await the new arrivals.

"'Father," said the young warrior, "I have returned with a message stick from the Walaroi. In their country there is game in plenty. The old men and women of our tribe may go to the plains with the children without fear. They may remain there until the storm clouds break again on the Moonbis."

'The old man grunted his satisfaction, then pointed at the girl who stood bashfully behind her lover.

"'What *inargung* is this?" he demanded.

"'This," said Murri Duli, "is a woman of the Walaroi. I have taken her for my gin."

'Kumbo Piriwal grunted again. "What is her name?"

'The *inargung* spoke softly. "I am called Ippatha Bilba. My mother——" The girl broke off, startled by the horror in the old man's face.

"'Murri Duli." The chief's voice was vibrant with anger. "When at the Cora you held in your hands the spear which Baiame gave to you, did not the medicine men teach you of these things?"

'Murri Duli remembered. His mind went back to that midnight hour when the dust, and the screaming and the

shouting made him want to run from the clearing, when the trials of the Cora were almost over. He felt again the searing pain as the womerah stick knocked against his stubborn tooth. And he stood again in the pride of his newly acquired manhood, as the medicine men taught him the sacred totem laws of the Kamilaroi and its kindred tribes.

“You are of the class of Murri,” the old ones had told him. “Your totem name you derive from your mother, as do all the children of the Kamilaroi. Kubbotha Duli was your mother—Duli, the iguana, of the class of Kubbotha. Henceforth, as a warrior and hunter, you will be called Murri Duli; the Iguana of the Moonbi tribe of the Kamilaroi. Go forth to the plains and the mountains, Murri Duli, and in your own time choose a wife. But remember, always, the sacred marriage laws of your people. You may marry the women of the class of Budda or Martha, who carry the totem of the paddy melon. But no other woman can you take to wife and live. Go forth, Murri Duli, and be a great hunter and a mighty warrior.”

‘The heart of Murri Duli was consumed with a terrible sorrow. He could not meet the burning eyes of his father nor look again upon the tear-stained face of his mate. “Go,” he whispered, and flung himself towards his gunyah; the choking sob and fleeing footsteps of Ippatha Bilba finding within him a mournful echo.

‘Evening came and Punnal, the sun, tipped the Moonbis with gold. Punnal snuggled down to his bed, and the mountains grew crimson as though dipped in a bath of blood. Murri Duli squatted before his camp-fire, his head cradled in his knees, his groans expressing his bitterness of heart and soul. Old Kumbo Piriwal looked on him before he rested, sad because of his son’s sorrow, yet proud of the young warrior who was now proving his manhood. The old chief fell asleep; but when the magpie’s morning carol awakened him, he left his tribe in the gunyahs and set out westward alone—for Murri Duli had gone.

‘Kumbo Piriwal was the greatest tracker in the mountains. Night came, then day, and the tracks of Murri Duli joined with those of another, and swung away to the northward. Night

came again. Kumbo Piriwal, his work finished, turned sorrowfully eastward, a broken, worn-out man. The spirits of Murri Duli and Ippatha Bilba had gone to seek pardon from Baiame for their betrayal of the sacred laws of the totem. Punnal had bathed the mountains in blood.

'What a sad, plaintive story, Martin,' said Nance. 'Are their laws really as strict as all that? Surely the poor old chief didn't have to kill them?'

'As I said, Nance, I think it's a legend and not a piece of history, but it serves to illustrate the importance which the natives attach to the laws of the totem. That, of course, is only one aspect of an extremely complicated social structure. Bru Bri has told me many things. But there are many others which he does not discuss. The aborigines are a much greater people, Nance, than is generally realized.'

When the two returned to the homestead, John Kane was there. He had ridden over to visit the family, Mollie said, and was being entertained with stories of recent happenings. He was able to add his own contribution by giving an account of Ruskin's meeting with the members of the Kane household.

But the principal purpose of his visit was to inform Mr. Wade that Joe Kane would co-operate with him in his plan to sell heifers in Newcastle. Nance and O'Callaghan had grave doubts as to whether this was, indeed, the primary purpose, and they slightly hinted that way, thereby causing some embarrassment.

It was agreed that developments at Warrah should not be allowed to interfere with the expedition, but that the droving party should be reduced in number, and should travel west of the Warrah settlement so as not to provoke any incidents. Contrary to the original plans, O'Callaghan and Abo should remain at home.

The first job would be to select and round up the stock to be taken south. This would be done during the next couple of days to enable the expedition to set out without much delay.

John Kane was found makeshift accommodation for the night, and on the morrow, he, O'Callaghan and Abo left the home-

stead together. They rode south along Yellow Creek for about four miles from the house and then John crossed the stream and turned eastwards towards his own home. He would acquaint his father of the programme which had been agreed upon, and Kane's quota of heifers would be mustered and driven across to Wade's station. The drive to Newcastle would commence from there.

The other two continued on along the creek, their purpose being to cull suitable stock from Wade's and O'Callaghan's herds, and move them down near the homestead in readiness for the drive.

They had herded a few of the heifers into a blind valley, and were eating their lunch preparatory to driving the animals back along Yellow Creek, when they heard a number of rifle shots from some distance further south.

'Some o' them b—— convicts shootin' up on the Wallabadahs,' said Abo. 'I hope they finish up shootin' their b—— selves.'

But O'Callaghan was sure that the shots had come from the Golden Valley side of the mountains, and he thought that they should be investigated.

In the foothills of the mountains the two men found a number of slaughtered cattle. There was no poisoning this time, nor were there any spears. The animals had been shot—some a little time ago, some quite recently. Abo gave vent to a torrent of profanity. O'Callaghan found horse tracks and the two men followed them.

At first the horseman had ridden south and then, instead of crossing the Wallabadahs, he had angled towards the east. The tracks presented no difficulty. Obviously the man had made no attempt to hide them, but seemed to have selected soft ground in preference to stony country whenever he had the choice. For some three miles the two men followed the marauder, then O'Callaghan stopped and halted his companion.

'Well, what do you make of it, Abo?' he asked.

'It don't make no b—— sense to me,' the stockman replied. 'Where the hell's the feller makin' for; Yeller Mountain?'

'It's pretty clear to me now,' O'Callaghan said. 'Ruskin

failed to get us involved with the natives, so he hopes to get Alex Wade and Joe Kane at each other's throats. These tracks are too plain to be genuine. I'll warrant they'll lead right to Kane's place. This business has gone far enough. I think I'll have to see Hardy and get him to take these people away. And if he won't do that it'll be a matter for the authorities in Sydney. The Governor told me that, for the time being, we people up here would have to remain a law unto ourselves. To take him literally we'll have to kill somebody, and we can't do that. I'll follow these tracks. They'll take me to Kane's. Then if I can follow them from Kane's to Warrah I'll go on to the Port and, if necessary, to Sydney. You go back and tell Alex Wade what's happened. We'll have to postpone our trip to Newcastle for the time being.'

Abo reluctantly agreed. Personally he thought O'Callaghan was too soft.

'Me, I'd be a law unter meself all right,' he said. 'I'd gather up all the men we got an' go down an' blow all their blarsted convicted heads off.'

Tracking was by no means a new experience for O'Callaghan. He had often trailed wandering cattle for miles through the bush. It was a profession which required a little practice, but mainly depended upon keen observation and common sense. But the present task was an easy one. All that he had to do was to follow the plain hoof marks in the soft ground, and to continue straight on where he lost them in rocky country until he picked them up again.

In the bush which surrounded Kane's homestead the tracks disappeared. Mary Kane greeted the squatter with a smile and an invitation inside, which he respectfully declined.

'A drink of water, Mrs. Kane,' he said, 'and I'll push on. Is Joe about?'

'No, he's down the river front somewhere. Alf's working round the house not far away. What's the trouble, Martin? You look worried.'

O'Callaghan explained briefly. Mary was astonished.

'I didn't like that fellow the minute I saw him come up here with young John,' she said. 'He smelt of stale rum. But it's

hard to believe a man could be so low as to try and stir up trouble like that. Here comes Alf now.'

The stocky figure of the little bushman appeared from around the corner of the building. O'Callaghan outlined what had happened and told Dillon to saddle a horse and help in the search for the cattle killer's return tracks. Between them the two men covered acres of country, carefully examining every yard of ground, but to no avail. After hours of searching, O'Callaghan gave it up in despair. The evening was drawing in and he couldn't follow tracks now for any distance if he did find them.

The two men turned back towards the house, Alf Dillon in the lead. The footmarks of Alf's horse caught O'Callaghan's attention, and he called a halt and dismounted. He examined the hoofprints closely.

'How long has Kane had that horse?' he asked abruptly.

'Long as it's been alive, which be accurate calculatin' ain't more'n six year.'

'Anyone ever ride him but you?'

'No, he's generally reckoned to be my 'orse. Why, what's got into yer, Cal?'

'That's the animal I've been tracking,' O'Callaghan said, shortly.

'Hell! Now I come to think of it, it's a singular damned thing. He's been spellin' down Yeller Creek way for a few weeks past. I ain't seen him until I goes out to saddle meself a 'orse a while ago.'

O'Callaghan felt completely frustrated. Had he been following the tracks of a riderless animal? Had Ruskin's men used the horse to lay the trail? Or had Alf himself been involved? This last thought made the squatter feel a little ashamed, but the evidence was there. Perhaps Alf had encountered some of Ruskin's men while riding the south-western boundary. Ruskin had authority to use some of the Company's wealth. Perhaps Alf had been too sorely tempted. After all, he was only an employee of Joe Kane.

O'Callaghan turned to the little bushman.

'What were you doing last night and this morning, Alf?' he asked quietly.

'Mindin' me own b—— business, same as you can be doin' now, Cal,' Alf replied, heatedly.

Then he left O'Callaghan and rode back to the homestead.

'I've hurt him now and I'll get nothing out of him,' O'Callaghan thought, 'but I can easily find out what his movements have been.'

Then he was struck with a new thought. If Alf were innocent, the man who had ridden the little bushman's horse must have made his departure on foot. This would explain the squatter's failure to find return tracks. But there were men in the Moonbis—the dusky sons of the bush—who could track the most nimble-footed and wary of men.

O'Callaghan went back to the house and asked Mary Kane to put him up some food for a journey. Alf kept out of his way. Mary asked a number of questions, but he said he wasn't free to answer. He told her to tell Joe that the expedition to Newcastle was to be postponed; and then he rode away to the north.

'He's a queer fellow,' Mary said. 'You can never tell what he's thinking, or what he's going to do.'

'The coot's not right in the 'ead, if yer ask me, Mrs. Kane,' said Alf, who was in the kitchen.

## CHAPTER XII

### TRACKS AND TRACKERS

THE setting sun bathed the sky in a wash of gold as O'Callaghan crossed the Peel and wended his way along the picturesque banks of the Moonbi River. Soon the towering mountains, flanking either side of the stream, shut out the fading light. Save for an eagle-hawk circling in the heavens above him, its wings tipped with golden sunlight, this mountain-locked valley seemed devoid of life. Everywhere was peace—an eerie, silent peace—such as brings comfort to the lofty-minded



and loneliness to the meaner souls who dare to profane its sanctuary.

The daylight faded. In the limited space above, stars began to twinkle. Deep in the Moonbi fastnesses now the squatter heard the night-hawk screech; heard the fearful howl of the warrigal scenting its prey and the gloomy call of the mopoke sounding its pessimistic serenade. The coming of night had destroyed the peace of the mountains, and everywhere was life.

The silence of the Moonbis always entranced O'Callaghan, but their noises recalled him to material things and he realized that he was hungry. Dismounting, he built a little fire in a basin of rocks, took his billy and ration-bag from his saddle and prepared and ate a hearty meal. He intended to ride a few miles deeper into the mountains and find Bru Bri's camp, if possible, before the faint light from the moon was lost to him beneath the mountain rim. The blacks were constantly moving. They might be within a few miles of him, or they might be thirty miles away. But he knew that they would reveal themselves as soon as his presence became known to them.

After riding for a mile or so deeper into the mountains O'Callaghan halted his horse and listened, as he saw a faint flicker of light between the tree trunks. He had not long to wait before a kookaburra laugh echoed from the mountainside, and quickly he imitated it. A moment or two of silence, then a repetition of the cry came as a signal that the visitor had been recognized and might approach the camp.

Contrary to O'Callaghan's expectations, Bru Bri's tribe was established here under conditions of comparative permanency. The camp comprised a number of bark huts made from material stripped from the butts of the surrounding gums, the huge slabs laced together with kangaroo sinews. A little fire glowed in front of each of the gunyahs; for these people are of a highly superstitious nature and every precaution must be taken to prevent evil medicine from entering into the spirits of the tribesmen as they sleep. But the fires were now serving a dual purpose; for the odours of roasting 'possum and other aboriginal delicacies invaded the squatter's nostrils as he approached. Some distance away from the main group of huts a little cluster

of smaller, but similar, abodes nestled in the timber. These were the sleeping quarters of the boys and uninitiated young men of the tribe.

The camp was deserted; but as the squatter rode into the firelight, the natives swarmed from the surrounding scrub, whence they had fled at the first alarm that a white man was approaching. They returned, clamouring and laughing in the joy that it gave them to welcome Piriwallan, the great chief of the White Tribe, to their camp.

Bru Bri was the first to greet him, shaking his hand after the white man's custom. Then came the other warriors, nodding their heads and showing their firm, white teeth in broad grins of pleasure and satisfaction. Biraban was there also, O'Callaghan noticed, strutting around like a young peacock as he endeavoured to explain, above the general din, how bravely he had recovered from the effects of the White Tribe's evil magic.

The women of the tribe were modest and shy, casting furtive glances at the visitor, and speaking among themselves in low, musical voices. The older women were stout and ugly, but the young *inargungs* were extremely beautiful in form and bearing.

Most of the noise emanated from the children—little dimpled, long-limbed, bronze-coloured cherubs, who danced around the squatter's horse, shouting at the top of their high-pitched voices, in great glee over this unusual sight.

When the customary courtesies had been exchanged, O'Callaghan dismounted, tied his horse to a tree, and followed Bru Bri as the chief beckoned him towards his gunyah. With typical native brusqueness, Bru Bri demanded to know his visitor's business, and O'Callaghan explained. For a long time the chief was silent, squatting on his haunches, his chin resting in his cupped hands. When, finally, he raised his head to the firelight, his brows were furrowed in thought.

'Piriwallan,' he said, speaking in the colourful dialect of the Kamilaroi, 'the white people of three totems dwell in the great Valley of the Moonbis. These people live their lives. My people live theirs. We respect each other's customs. *Nakillan bali*—we look at each other as friends. But I have heard of the

white man and his evil magic where he lives in numbers by the Big Water, and makes war against the black people. I have seen the men of whom you speak. They are of the Gold Totem—the seekers after wealth. And many of them have been sent to these hunting-grounds for punishment—for breaking their totem laws.

‘Many summers ago, Piriwallan, you told me tales of these tribes by the Big Water. How they were filled with evil magic and sent away by their chief—outlawed from their tribe—even as you were outlawed, Piriwallan, although your heart was clean. I have been to the Warrah hunting-grounds. I have seen the White Tribe’s chieftain there. I have felt his evil magic in the air which he breathes. I have seen him drinking fire-water to feed and nourish the evil in his spirit. I have learned to hate him, because I hate the evil spirits. Piriwallan, he must be kept from the Valley of the Moonbis or the tribes of the Kamilaroi, and your tribes also, Piriwallan, must perish for ever.’

Bru Bri finished and waited patiently until his white friend had considered the substance of his speech. Then, as O’Callaghan remained silent, the chieftain continued.

‘Piriwallan, your way is my way. The great Baiame—the Good Spirit whose magic has made the sun and the moon and the stars—will bless us for protecting our tribes. Let us gather our warriors and go to the evil chieftain. Let us attack him with the *warai*, the spear, and the thunder-stick. *Bumarra bunbilla bulan*—let him meet his death—the death which he deserves.’

O’Callaghan was filled with admiration for the loyalty and patriotism of his courageous, dusky friend; but Bru Bri’s proposal was really too drastic to be put into execution.

‘No, Bru Bri,’ he said. ‘Many of our warriors, yours and mine, would be slain; and we would incur the wrath of the good chief who rules with a just hand away to the south. We will take our troubles to him. Lend me a warrior, so that I can find the evil one’s tracks. Then I will learn the truth, and I will be able to go to the big chief and all will be well.’

Bru Bri nodded.

‘You are right, Piriwallan,’ he said. ‘Biraban will go with

you. He is fleet-footed as the emu, brave as the mother kookaburra, and far-seeing as the eagle-hawk from whom he has taken his name. Let the young man bring honour to his totem. When Punnal—the sun—jumps from the mountain-tops you will go. Now the women will bring you *karai kokoin*—food and water. You must eat and sleep.'

O'Callaghan enjoyed his meal of kangaroo flesh broiled on the coals. Then, taking his saddle for a pillow, he strolled a few paces from the camp, and with the soft earth for a bed, and the bright stars for a counterpane, he was soon fast asleep.

At daylight he awakened to find breakfast ready, and Biraban preparing himself for his departure. Straight as the stringy bark on the mountains, in all his six feet of splendid manhood, the young warrior cut a striking figure. A strong hunting belt of possum skin girded his waist, supporting his primitive weapons. His stone fighting axe hung in the centre of his back, its slender handle resting along the depression of his spine. Above his hips, and a little to the front, he had hung, on one side, his war boomerang, and on the other, his club or *nulla-nulla*. In his right hand he carried two short spears and a womerah or throwing-stick.

'*Tirag bag katan*, Piriwallan,' he said. 'I am ready, let us go.'

O'Callaghan ate a little *karai*, as the natives called their kangaroo meat. While the rest of the natives were still sleeping he rode out of the camp, the young hunter running by his side.

The two reached Kane's station, skirted the homestead and halted in a clump of apple trees a mile or so to the south of it. Here they ate a little of the roasted *karai* which the squatter had packed in his saddle-bag. Then Biraban said he would search here for tracks.

'You remain still until I return, Piriwallan,' he said. '*Uwanun bota bag*—I will go alone.'

O'Callaghan waited patiently. He could not dispel his suspicion of Alf Dillon's complicity in the outrages. He was anxious for Biraban's return. When the hunter came back the glowing eyes of the native spoke eloquently of his triumph. 'Follow me, Piriwallan,' he said.

About half a mile from the spot where they had rested, Biraban led the squatter to a little stream of water trickling down from the side of Yellow Mountain. Over an outcrop of rock, a tiny cascade fell into a natural basin, and the faint imprint of a man's hand was impressed in the silt surrounding the pool.

'The evil white man rested here to drink,' explained the warrior. 'Then he walked away towards the setting sun. Let us follow him.'

As they progressed, Biraban explained the signs by means of which he tracked his quarry. A broken twig or blade of grass, a faint scratch on a fallen log—these things spoke volumes to the hunter. Once Biraban paused and examined the ground. Then he executed a wide circle around the spot which had attracted his attention.

'The white man passed here,' he explained. 'See the short-cropped grass. Two wallabies were feeding there when he came. Their tracks show that they were frightened. They didn't go away together. They separated and hopped away in opposite directions as the white man passed between them.'

The cattle killer had kept to the mountains, where the hard, rocky nature of the ground made his tracks impossible for a white man to follow. Travelling a westerly direction, the course which he had taken swung away towards the pass through the Wallabadahs, due south from the scene of the outrage. The tracker and his friend reached this pass just as the sun sank below the mountains and darkness made the blackfellow's task impossible. The two men camped, and as soon as the morning light was sufficiently strong to read the tracks they continued on their way.

The quarry had changed his direction and headed south through the Wallabadahs. O'Callaghan's lingering suspicions of Alf Dillon's complicity were completely dispelled. Right in the centre of the pass they found the hoof marks of a number of horses. The blackfellow found the tracks of some men who had come in on foot here from different directions. The plain tracks of the horses led away south—an easy trail for O'Callaghan to follow.

'You may return to the Moonbis now, Biraban,' he said. 'I can follow these tracks alone.'

Biraban remained motionless, a pained and disappointed expression on his face.

'You are not happy, Biraban,' O'Callaghan said. '*Minnug ba bin*—what is the matter with you?'

'I have served you well, Piriwallan,' the young man replied, standing erect, his dusky chest expanded. 'I am a warrior. What have I done that you do not wish me to help you to destroy the White Tribe's evil magic? Am I not the brother of Bru Bri, the great chief of the Moonbis? Is not my totem the brave eagle-hawk?'

Unwittingly, O'Callaghan had insulted Biraban by stating his intention of dispensing with the young warrior's services in the hour of danger. To make amends, he invited the native to come with him as far as Warrah. Once past the settlement the danger for the squatter would be over, and Biraban could return to his tribe. He would give the young man a message to take to Alex Wade.

When they reached the southern side of the Wallabadahs where two great hills flanked the pass, Biraban drew near to O'Callaghan's saddle and spoke softly.

'On the top of each of these mountains,' he said, 'a white man is riding a horse. One sits still and watches us. The other rides down towards the track in front of us.'

O'Callaghan told him to hide—to keep abreast in the scrub.

'We may have to fight,' he said. 'I will continue on as though I have not seen them.'

The warrior vanished like a shadow into the shelter of the timber and O'Callaghan rode on, watching the track ahead of him, alert to meet any danger. For half a mile he rode, then halted abruptly. There was a huge notice-board nailed to a tree in the centre of the track advising that 'By the grace of His Most Excellent Majesty, William IV, King of England, etc . . .' this land had become the property of the Colonial Pastoral Company and that any who trespassed upon it would immediately be apprehended.

'A shrewd move,' thought O'Callaghan. 'So the Golden

Valley is now isolated from the coast—almost in a state of siege. We shall see, after nightfall, when these two watchdogs have been thrown off the scent.'

He was about to wheel his horse along the return track when he heard a joyous shout from the scrub ahead of him. Then he saw a little unkempt, hatless fellow, mounted on a great chestnut stock horse. He was clad in blue flannel shirt and moleskin breeches, and his red, tousled hair streamed behind him in the wind. A broad grin wrinkled his ugly little face as he shouted again and again.

'Sure an' begorrah, if it ain't me ould friend Martin O'Callaghan. An' for what are ye bein' afther trespassin' yerself on the Company's property?

O'Callaghan recognized the little fellow. Fifteen years ago he had been transported for poaching a rabbit on the estate of one of the landed Anglo-Irish aristocracy. And he was always in trouble. O'Callaghan had taken a liking to him in the old days down at the capital.

'Hullo, Tim,' he cried, warmly shaking hands. 'You surprised me. I didn't know that you were working for the Company.'

'That's what I'm doin', me boy, for the time bein'. But if they keep up the dirty work they're afther doin', I won't be workin' for 'em much longer. In fact I was thinkin' o' leavin' this night now, an' goin' up to see the folks over the mountains up there. An' where are ye comin' from this blessed day, Martin? Are ye travellin' down from Moreton Bay?'

'No, Tim. I'm one of the folks over the mountains. I have a holding up there in the valley.'

'You've a what?' The little fellow shouted as though the squatter's statement constituted an outrage. 'Am I right in surmisin' ye mean the valley just t'other side o' the range?'

'Yes, Tim. But why all the excitement?'

'Then I've got some terrible information to tell ye of. The feller that's boss up here is plannin' to execute ye all entirely within this blessed week.'

As briefly as the characteristics of his race would allow, Tim gave O'Callaghan an account of the recent developments at

Warrah. About a week ago Tim's accumulated sentences had expired, and casting around Sydney for something to do, he had met an emancipist of doubtful character with whom he was acquainted. It appeared that Ruskin had been in communication with this fellow, and had given him a commission to engage half a dozen ex-convicts, in the Company's name, for service at Warrah. There were promises of big money to be earned in the strange land to the north. Tim was under the impression that Ruskin wanted bad men, and he supposed that his own wild nature had earned him this reputation. Tim's adventurous spirit had urged him to accept the proposition.

On their arrival at Warrah the new recruits had been put to work with Ruskin's convict servants. Since then, Tim's observant eyes had noticed strange things going on. Some of the men had been selected for long night rides. It was rumoured that this chosen few had earned big money, though Tim was unaware of what they had been doing.

'It was some damnable-business up north, I'm thinkin', after what I heard last night,' he said. 'I was layin' awake shmokin' in me tent—which be the way is next to Ruskin's—an' dreamin' o' the day when I'd have a passage saved back to old Erin, when I heard somethin' attractin' me attention. "Tim, me man," I says, "eavesdroppin' is a crime the like of which you've never been accused of committin'. But if you take my advice ye'll listen to what's goin' on in that tent next door to ye." "Right," says Tim, an' opens his ears, an' there was the boss an' Johnson, a better man than Ruskin, though not be much, cursin' an' swearin' an' abusin' their luck like as if the devil himself had been after chasin' 'em.

"Everythin' gone to blitherin' blazes," says Ruskin, though not so polite like. "Nothin' seems to affect 'em," he says. "That blarsted Killarney's at the bottom of it, I'll be bound."

"Well, what in hell are ye goin' to do about it?" says the other feller.

"We gotter do somethin', ye idiot," says his nibs. "Sure they're awake to us be now. They'll be runnin' cryin' to the guvner if we don't do somethin' to stop 'em."

"You're in charge o' the station," says the other feller.



"Put a coupler sentries on the mountains an' stop 'em from trespassin' on the Company's property. They can't get to 'Ardy or the guvner no other way."

"That's a good wheeze," says Ruskin. They was drinkin' rum an' laughin' an' cacklin' away. "Then we'll wipe the whole bleedin' show out," says Ruskin, "an' leave no trace of 'em. They got money up there, too. We'll get that, an' burn their 'ouses down. We'll do in the fools we take to help us. We'll tell 'Ardy the blacks done it. I gotter score to settle with that blarsted Irishman." An' they cackles again an' drinks more rum.

'Be this time me ears is burnin' an' I starts to snore like mad. Next they talks about how they're goin' to promise big money to a selected few of us to help with the dirty work and do us in when it's all over. Next mornin'—which is to-day—they sends a feller up here to stick up that warnin' notice, and me own self to help 'im guard the pass. I'm sittin' up there on that hill all day long, thinkin' things over, an' I comes to conclude from what I've heard that there's people up there over the inountains, an Irishman among 'em, an' the spalpeens is plannin' to execute 'em entirely. So I makes up me mind to stick there until dark, when the other feller stops watchin' me as well as the pass, then to ride up and find them people and tell 'em all about it. Then you comes ridin' gaily along, an' I s'pose, Martin, me boy, you're the feller his nibs calls Killarney.'

The squatter sat rigid on his horse, his head turned towards the south. In a way he was glad that matters had reached a climax. The blood of Irish chieftains surged through his veins, feeding a native courage strengthened by a life of open air and hardship.

The little ex-convict, watching him, murmured softly, 'Sure he's royal as Brian Boru.'

'Tim,' said O'Callaghan, 'the valley up north belongs to me and my friends. We have stock and houses, and it is true we have money. We could leave the country quietly and let these scoundrels have their way. But we would curse ourselves for the rest of our lives for the cowards that we would be. If I were there alone, Tim, I would simply go back and defy

them. But we have women up there, and that makes it hard. If I could only get word to Port Stephens I could ensure that this attack will be their last.'

'Would ye be after trustin' me for tō take it for you?' asked the little fellow eagerly.

'I didn't like to ask you, Tim, but I was hoping you would suggest that. I can't go myself, now. My place is with my friends. You will earn my lifelong gratitude if you will go. As for trusting you, Tim, your native sense of fair play is sufficient guarantee.'

'I'm wid ye there entirely, me boy. I've a bit of writin' material and some old paper in me jacket. Ye can take 'em an' write what ye've got to say. But don't be long about it, for that other feller was watchin' me talkin' to ye. He'll be back be the camp be now, an' when he reports the things he's been seein' there'll be a hell of a hullabaloo.'

'You'll have to keep well hidden and ride hard until you're away from Warrah, Tim,' replied the squatter as he took the lead and paper. Then he dismounted, and resting the paper against the smooth bark of a tree, he wrote:

Your Excellency:

A band of assigned convicts under your old Warder, William Ruskin, for some considerable time have been persecuting the settlers in the Golden Valley. They are established at Warrah, in the southern foothills of the Wallabadah Mountains. They are employed by the Colonial Pastoral Company, but are acting solely in the interests of their local foreman. I have reliable information that even now Ruskin is planning a wholesale massacre and my comrades and I are about to take drastic steps to defend our lives and property. Timothy Riley, the bearer of this note, and for whose integrity I can vouch, will give you further information. I feel sure that, in the interests of Justice, on receipt of this information, Your Excellency will take immediate steps to afford us military protection.

(Signed) MARTIN O'CALLAGHAN

13th day of March, 1833

O'Callaghan read the note over carefully, folded it neatly and gave it to his companion.

'There you are, Tim,' he said. 'Show this to Mr. Hardy at Port Stephens and then go on to Sydney. Hardy will take whatever action he can with his limited resources, I'm sure; and the Governor will do the rest. Ride carefully, 'lad, and speedily, and may God be with you.'

The squatter stood watching the receding figure until a bend in the track hid him from sight, then he turned to his horse and remounted.

Suddenly he thought of Biraban, whose existence he had completely forgotten under the severe stress of the last few minutes.

'Biraban,' he shouted, cupping his hands around his mouth. 'Biraban, *tanan uwolla*—come here.'

But the echoes from the mountains alone made answer, *tanan uwolla! tanan uwolla!*

For half an hour O'Callaghan searched and shouted, but with no result. He concluded that the hunter had seen his white companion in friendly conversation with Tim, and had therefore returned to his tribe. So the squatter turned his horse and headed back towards the Golden Valley.

## CHAPTER XIII

### EVIL MAGIC

BIRABAN followed the Great White Chief, keeping to the shelter of the timber, listening to the footfalls of Piriwallan's horse and those of the man of evil magic who was riding down the mountainside. Biraban scented danger to his friend and he ran lightly, picking soft, soundless places on which to tread, every sense alert, tense, listening. The white chief's horse was still, but the sounds of the other grew louder—nearer. Biraban wriggled like a snake through the grass. The Great White Chief was in danger.

Biraban heard a shout. Was it the war-cry of the man of evil magic? Biraban must hasten, but he must be careful. The man of evil magic must not hear or see him.

Piriwallan was smiling. Biraban could see the chief through the tall grass. Was it a smile of victory? Had good magic prevailed against evil? Biraban reached a tall tree, close to Piriwallan, and flattened himself against its sheltering bole. The man of evil magic was talking, but Piriwallan still smiled. He shook the hand of the man of evil magic. This was the white man's sign of friendship, for often Piriwallan shook the hand of Bru Bri. The Great White Chief had conquered the evil one and had made him his friend. And this without any fighting. Truly, Piriwallan was a great chief.

Biraban did not like this man of evil magic. His hair was the colour of the setting sun. Perhaps, when evil magic entered the warriors of the White Tribes, the Giver of Light deserted them, painting their hair as He departed. Yes, that was it. Piriwallan's hair was like the sun when it gleamed over the mountain-tops in the early morning. His hair had caught the light of Punnal and kept it. So it was Punnal who gave good magic to the White Tribes.

The two white men were still talking. Biraban did not want the evil one to see him watching, so he slipped, silently, back into the grass, and wriggled away through the timber.

Biraban was hungry. A wallaby came by. He would kill it, and when he rejoined Piriwallan they would cook it and eat. But the wallaby was fleet of foot and Biraban was tired. Far into the mountains went the wallaby, heading east, pausing at intervals beyond the range of Biraban's spears to turn and laugh at him. Biraban grew angry. The tired spirits left him and entered the body of the wallaby.

Twice the womerah swept in an arc above the black man's head. Twice his spears sang their songs of death. A short, sharp struggle, a chop with the fighting axe, and Biraban turned west, laden with *karai* for Piriwallan and for himself.

But Piriwallan had gone. Had he ridden away with the man of evil magic? No, that could not be, for one set of horse's tracks led north—the other east. Biraban could follow the

tracks of horses, but he could not identify them. Piriwallan had said that he would go to the Great Chief by the Big Water, so the warrior with the hair like the setting sun had gone towards the Moonbis.

Should Biraban return and warn the warriors of his tribe that the evil one was travelling towards their hunting-grounds, or should he follow Piriwallan? The white chief might still be in danger. The tribe of the Moonbis might suffer at the hands of the evil one. But what would be said of Biraban if he returned to his people and Piriwallan were captured by the warriors of the Gold Totem? What would Biraban's children say when, after many summers, they heard the story from the women? What would their children say when his bones lay rotting in the Moonbis? They would point their fingers. They would laugh and shout:

'That is Biraban. *Bunkillitin noa murra*—he ran away from the fighting!'

No! Biraban was a warrior. He must follow Piriwallan and fight by the white chief's side. But he must run carefully, for the other evil warrior, whom he had espied sitting on the hill-top, had seen the black man running beside Piriwallan's horse.

From the edge of a mountain rim Biraban saw the white gunyahs of the Evil Tribe in the valley beneath him. The tracks of Piriwallan's horse led away towards the rising sun. Biraban must hurry, for Piriwallan travelled in great bounds like the kangaroo. Biraban ran faster. Spots of blood lay on the grass of the track. Biraban ran swiftly—silently—ready to fight.

A dark splotch of blood. The mark where a body had fallen. A bloody trail leading into the timber. Half-hidden by kangaroo grass Biraban found, not the Great White Chief, but the man of evil magic—he whose hair reflected the light of the setting sun. He was dead.

Biraban's heart was filled with sorrow. He did not love the man of evil magic, but death always filled him with sorrow. The man had been killed with a thunder-stick. Biraban saw the hole where the little grey stone had entered his body, and

through which the life blood had drained. The evil one must have ridden towards the Moonbis and returned to follow Piriwallan, and Piriwallan had killed him. But why? Piriwallan had conquered the evil one. They had looked at each other as friends. Why should the Great White Chief have killed him?

Biraban raised his head and sniffed the breeze. A strong scent assailed his nostrils. It was not the scent of the apple blossom, nor the box, nor the gum, nor the turpentine. And the wattles were not yet in flower. Yet it was sweet and fragrant and alluring. Biraban was curious. He would find what it was, then he would search for the tracks of Piriwallan and follow him.

Biraban followed the strong, sweet fragrance, and then he saw something resting on a stone. Something like the black gourd which Piriwallan kept tied to his horse, and in which he heated his water. The strange fragrance came from this vessel and Biraban peered within. It contained a queer black water. Biraban touched the substance, then sucked the end of his finger. The water burned his tongue, yet the fire left a pleasant feeling, and the taste was sweet as native honey. Biraban was thirsty. The water was sweet and tempting. Surely it could not harm him. He raised the gourd to his lips and drank till there was no more.

A feeling of great satisfaction, of wonderful joy and exuberance. Biraban wanted to shout, he felt so happy. He wanted to climb the tall turpentines; to fly over the gunyahs of the men of evil magic. Evil magic? What a ridiculous thing! There is no evil magic. Everywhere is happiness, and peace, and contentment.

Biraban heard a laugh—all the trees were laughing. Biraban laughed, too—he felt so happy. Now the trees were talking; talking and laughing—yes, the trees and the rocks were talking and laughing. Biraban tried to listen. What were they saying?

'Se 'ow easy it was, Johnson. They'll all be like that soon. A few kegs o' rum, a little bit o' careful palaver, an' the whole tribe's ourn. A promise of a few more kegs, an' there won't be a man left alive, nor a bleedin' 'ouse left standin' up there in that there Golden Valley.'

They spoke in a strange dialect—the trees and the rocks.

What did they mean? Biraban could not understand them. He did not know what they were talking about, neither did he care. If the trees and the rocks wished to speak, let them do so. If they wished to laugh, why not? Biraban was happy. Let the trees and the rocks be happy also, and laugh and talk if they wished.

Biraban slept, and when he awoke it was night. A fierce fire burned in his throat, and in his tongue, and in his eyes and his head. He craved for more of the black water, and reached for the empty tin that he might lick it dry. But strangely the black water had returned. The gourd had filled whilst he slept. Truly the black water was magic, a good magic that filled him with happiness when he drank, then burned its way out through his head and returned to the gourd.

Biraban sipped a little. The water now disturbed his stomach. He could drink no more. He would save it—take it back to share with his brother Bru Bri, and the warriors of his tribe.

But what of Piriwallan? If there had been danger the white chief must be out of it now. He had killed the man with the light of the setting sun in his hair. Either Piriwallan had gone on to the good chief by the Big Water, or he had returned to the Valley of the Moonbis. It would be useless to follow him further. Biraban was sick and he was tired. A thousand *nulla-nullas* beat against his brain. But he must return to his tribe, where the medicine men would make him well again. Then he would rest and enjoy the black magic that always returned to the gourd.

Biraban rose to his feet. The night was still. The moon shone overhead. A warrigal howled in the timber and an answer came from the valley where glittered the fires of the tribe of the Gold Totem. An answer in a strange voice, unlike any warrigal that Biraban had ever heard.

Something big and dark lay on the ground beside the body of the man with the sunset hair. Biraban thought it a log, but yet it was unlike a log. And from it came the fragrance of the black, magic water. Biraban struck the top with his fighting axe. The blade pierced the wood, and a spray of magic water splashed across his face. Should the magic of Biraban's gourd

ever fail, here he could find it in abundance. Swiftly he carried the log to a little gully in the timber. Carefully he covered it with leaves and rocks, till even the eyes of the warrigal must be baffled. Then he tied the magic gourd to his belt and set off in long, swinging strides for his home in the distant Moonbis.

The spirits of light had vanquished the magic of darkness. The stars and the moon had fallen into the big water-hole away to the west. In the mountains the warrigal slept in his lair, his body gorged with his all-night feast on the flesh of the wallaroo. The mopoke and screech-owl hid in the crannies and cracks and caves. Makoro—the cod-fish—swam to his nest beneath the roots of the tall river gum, his hungry appetite satisfied after his meal of crickets and worms and grasshoppers. Punnal jumped from the mountain-tops, shedding his light and warmth on the Moonbis; tinting the trees and the hills with his colour; driving the dew from the grass in the valleys; destroying the shadows and filling the gorges with light. Tibbin—the birds of daylight—sang a welcome for Punnal. The kangaroos, cropping the sweet grass, raised their heads to greet him. The native bear fed on the eucalyptus gum tips. The ring-tailed 'possum thanked Punnal for his warmth, and cuddled himself in the fork of a tree where the gentle breezes rocked him to slumber. The snakes, and the frill-lizards, crept from their hiding-places in search of their morning sustenance.

The birds of daylight, screeching a warning, flew to the highest tree tops. Kangaroos ceased nibbling grass and, pursued with the evil spirits of fear, hopped away into the timber. The native bear neglected the gum tips, hiding himself in the hollow of the tree trunk. Snakes and frill-lizards glided noiselessly back to their holes beneath fallen logs, and into the rocks and crevices. But mighty Punnal smiled a welcome; for Biraban, the Eagle-hawk, had returned to the tribe of the Moonbis.

The men of the Moonbis grunted their greetings. The women smiled and returned to their cooking, their binding of spears and axes, their preparations of gums and ochres. Children laughed and clapped their hands as Biraban walked between the gunyahs.



Biraban asked for Bru Bri. The chief was out in the higher Moonbis, leading a party of warriors, hunting for meat for the day. Biraban loosened the gourd of black magic suspended from his belt. The women crowded around him, but the warriors drove them away, and formed a ring around the Eagle-hawk as they heard his tales of this wonderful, magical water.

Bru Bri, and six of his warriors, climbed down the face of the Moonbis, happy as the kookaburra in the tree tops; laden with *karti* to feed the women and children, the old men of the tribe and the hunters who remained in camp. Bru Bri and his warriors were happy; for when the chief of the Moonbis hunted with his tribe the great Baime was good to them, creating game in abundance.

But Punnal seemed to be angry. His fierce light shone from the heavens, stinging the backs of the hunters descending the dangerous precipice, heating the water which trickled down the rock face.

Bru Bri led his party away from the heat of the mountains, down to the cool of the valley, where the chattering river sparkled. Where spreading branches deflected the anger of Punnal, Bru Bri spoke to his warriors, addressing them as brothers.

'Let *kokoin*—the water—destroy the magic of Punnal. Let us enter the river and search for Makoro—the cod-fish. Let us strike him with our spears and take him home to our children.'

Bru Bri knew no evil, nor did he fear the bunyips—fabulous animals supposed to haunt swampy areas in the bush. He dived in the great, blue water-hole and his happy warriors followed. Soon they came to the surface with Makoro, and many of his children, wriggling on the ends of the long hunting spears.

The black man kills only for food. He hates unnecessary slaughter. To his big, compassionate heart the sight of suffering brings sorrow. When sufficient fish had been captured, Makoro and his family suffered no longer. Bru Bri and his warriors, laden with food, returned to the camp of the Moonbis.

When Bru Bri entered the camping ground three young

warriors lay sleeping. Biraban was squatting on his haunches, his head buried deep in his hands. Beside him lay an empty gourd, such as Piriwallan used to heat his drinking water. It was perforated with spear holes and cut with the blade of the fighting axe. The women had ceased their work and whispered together in fear. Biraban rocked from side to side, moaning and groaning, and crying:

‘The black magical water no longer returns to the gourd. The medicine men have destroyed it.’

Bru Bri ran to the Eagle-hawk and caught him by the shoulders.

‘Biraban, my brother,’ he said, ‘what evil have you been doing?’

Biraban answered, moaning:

‘Woe, woe to the tribe of the Moonbis! I have found a wonderful magic, and the medicine men have destroyed it. When I drink it fills me with exquisite happiness. The trees and the rocks sing my praises. I am almost as great as Baiame. But, when I cease to drink, I burn with the fierce fire of Punnal. The medicine men have destroyed my magic. I must return to the hunting-grounds of the tribe of the Gold Totem where I have hidden black magic in plenty.’

Bru Bri stepped away from his brother, and strode to the battered can on the grass. Stooping, he smelt it, then angrily straightened his body, and threw the vessel far into the timber.

‘Biraban,’ he said, returning to stand beside his brother, ‘the magic which you have found is the evil drink of the white men—the poisonous water which the white man has made to drive away his sorrows. But with his sorrows, he destroys his vitality, his manhood, and all the good magic given to him by Baiame. Biraban, you who are very young, know not the evils of magic. The great black tribes, which once dwelt in happiness by the Big Water, are now almost destroyed. Their manhood has gone. The flower of their womanhood has withered. Their traditions and chivalry are dead—all destroyed by the poisonous magic of the White Tribes of the Gold Totem.

‘Biraban, my brother, accept the advice of your chieftain. Forget that you have tasted of this black and evil magic. Forget

that more is hidden by the White Tribe's camp at Warrah. Awaken those sleeping warriors who are warriors no longer. Tell them what I have told you. Bid them forget, also, and remember only the mountains and the valleys; the fresh, crisp air of the Moonbis; the hunt and the fight; the women and the children; the sacred customs and traditions that dwell in the hearts of the men of the Kamilaroi.'

Biraban rose unsteadily to his feet.

'Bru Bri,' he said, 'in the hunt you excel me in wisdom and bushcraft. In battle, it has been truly said that you are the greatest of warriors. But you have not tasted the black magical water. You say that it is evil; yet I, who have tasted of it, know that it is good. You say that it destroys the warrior; yet I know when I drink, that I can conquer. You tell me to forget it. Can you forget a beautiful *inargung* whose soft arms cling to you; whose spirit calls to your spirit, bidding it take, and love, and be happy? You are my chief and my brother, but I cannot obey your wishes. No maiden ever called so alluringly as the black magic calls to me now. I must return to the hunting-grounds at Warrah, where the magical water is waiting to feed me.'

Bru Bri looked around the encampment. The three warriors, who had been sleeping, were awake and talking excitedly, rubbing their eyes and heads and licking their parched tongues. Some of the young men of the tribe had recovered the battered tin. They passed it around among them, smelling and licking it in turn, while they gradually grasped the gist of the conversation. Bru Bri felt that, even now, much harm had been done. The fascination of this evil magic was already gripping the hearts of his warriors. He must exercise the authority of his chieftainship.

With a blow from his open hand he felled a young man to the ground, tore the can from his grasp, and carried it to the river. When the chief returned to the camp, scowls and mutterings greeted him—the first that he had heard since he became chief of the Moonbis. The young fighting men murmured against him. Some of the older warriors were in sympathy with them. Others looked at him with expressions of loyalty

and sympathy. Could he enforce his authority? Could he force Biraban to remain in the camp of his people? If he did, would the tribe become divided and would they be brought to destruction? Bru Bri looked on the face of his brother. He looked at the warriors—at the faces of the women, whose expressions reflected the feelings of their mates, of their sons and their brothers. And he knew that he could not detain Biraban and destroy the peace of his tribe.

But if he allowed the Eagle-hawk to go, many young men would go with him. They would drink of the evil magic which Biraban had found and hidden. The evil white men at Warrah—the enemies of Piriwallan—would find them sleeping. They would fill them with more evil water, and would work their evils upon them. They would use them for wicked purposes. They would ultimately destroy them.

Bru Bri must find Piriwallan and tell the Great White Chief what had happened. Piriwallan's wisdom would help him. But meanwhile, the chief must do his best for the welfare of his tribe.

'Men of the Moonbis,' he said, 'you have heard the advice I have given you. I am Bru Bri, your chief, and you will do well to take it. I cannot force you against your wills, but think of the power of your tribe—the power that has made it the greatest of all the Kamilaroi. The power that has made you independent, dominant over your enemies, unafraid of the white man, happy and free as the kookaburra. Think of your honour and customs. Think of your chivalrous character, which has won for you the love of Piriwallan—the love and respect of the Great White Chief in the valley below us. Will you sacrifice all for the sting of an evil pleasure? Will you associate yourselves with the wicked white men at Warrah, the evil tribe from whom Biraban has obtained this black water? Will you destroy, for ever, the glorious tribe of the Moonbis? Will you destroy the love of Bru Bri, your chieftain? Will you drink this evil magic, and hide like the warrigal in the mountains, slinking furtively, lovers of darkness and shadows, afraid to stand in the open under the warm light of Punnal? Will you be useless in battle, afraid of the spears of your enemies, of the thunder-sticks

of the white man? Afraid to shout out your war-cry—to call your enemies, when they hide in the rocks and the mountains? Afraid to call, as your fathers called: "*Ma buwa bitia binug*—come out and fight like men." Think deeply, men of the Moonbis. Think well, before you answer. Then all who are true to their totem, come to the front of my gunyah.'

Stirred by their chief's words, the young men thought in silence. The older warriors walked across and squatted before the chief's big gunyah. One of the young men threw out his chest and silently joined them. In ones and twos, others followed his example. Away from the gunyah, Biraban sat moodily, with the three who had been sleeping.

In governing his tribe Bru Bri exercised great diplomacy. He knew well the hearts of his warriors, and how to stir them with martial speeches, and to win them to his side. He knew how to deal with rebellious subjects by kindness, or harsh measures, as occasion dictated. But the new, corroding factor of the white man's evil magic completely changed the black man's nature and inclinations. Bru Bri had won for the present, but how long would his words be remembered? Not many nights, if Biraban were to remain in the camp, filled with his longing for the magical water.

Bru Bri needed advice, and his wise, white friend should supply it. In the meantime, Biraban and the three young warriors must be allowed to go, so that the tribe of the Moonbis might be safe while its chief talked with Piriwallan. The Great White Chief would tell him how to destroy the evil fire-water of the white men of Warrah. How to render the wicked magic of these people incapable of rotting the hearts of his warriors.

'Biraban, my brother.' Bru Bri spoke gently, quietly. 'You others who have tasted the white man's evil water. Go and find the magic you have hidden by the gunyahs of the White Tribe at Warrah. Drink your fill, and enjoy the evil pleasure that it brings you. But, in your new-found happiness, remember a little the honour of your people. Hide from the prying eyes of the white men of evil magic. Do not let them find you

and poison your minds with lies—lies about your people—lies about themselves. Promises of rewards for services, which are nothing else but lies. Promises calculated to destroy the honour of your women, the bravery of your warriors, the power and unity of your tribe. Drink of the evil magic. Drink till there is no more. Then return to the tribe of the Moonbis, and give yourselves to the *balyas*. Let the medicine men make your hearts clean and healthy once more. *Waita uwolla—go.*

With a wave of his hand, the chief dismissed them, and then entered his gunyah to prepare for his visit to the Great White Chief of the Valley of the Moonbis. With heads drooping forward upon dusky chests, afraid to look up at the glorious sunlight, ashamed of the evil magic within them, Biraban, and the three young warriors, slunk away into the shadows beneath the foliage of the timber.

Oh, Men of Warrah! Oh, all you great warriors of the White Tribes in the vast hunting-grounds of Australia! Why did you seek to destroy the tribes of the children of sunshine? Why did you storm their primitive hearts with the fascinating evils of your boasted civilization? Why did you seek to involve them in the feuds of your bloody Gold Totem?

Biraban was a young warrior, fresh as the south wind in summer. Supple and strong as the sapling which grows on the tops of the Moonbis. Loyal and brave as the magpie, defending its young in the spring-time. Now Biraban slinks—an outcast—a slave to your soul-rotting magic. Other young warriors follow, lured by the taste of your evil. Still other young warriors will follow, till the chivalry and pride of the Moonbis has died in the hearts of this vanishing people.

Oh, Men of Warrah! The great Baiame makes answer. You have done this because you are evil—because gold and wealth are your totems. And when you are called from your hunting-grounds the great Baiame will speak to you:

'Men of Warrah. Warriors of the White Tribe by the Big Water. You have destroyed many black men—men who were far, far above you—men whom you should have been proud to call brothers. You have filled them with evil black magic. You have stolen their hunting-grounds. I loved my dark,

happy children. I gave them their beautiful hunting-grounds. *Waita uwolla*—go away. Go to the hunting-grounds of fire and darkness—for you I love no longer.'

## CHAPTER XIV

### A RECONCILIATION

It was a weary, hungry and almost exhausted settler who approached Wade's homestead during the early hours of the morning. Throughout his long ride back from Warrah, O'Callaghan had gone over Tim Riley's statement again and again. Ruskin, evidently disappointed and chagrined over the failure of his schemes, had decided upon a desperate move. The fellow was about to turn bushranger, with his gang of convict servants as his assistants. But, desperate though it was, it was a programme which, in its planning, had all the elements of success. Ruskin was sure to find gold in the homesteads of the settlers; for they often sold stock and hides in Port Stephens. They were completely cut off from civilization, with no means of getting a quick message to the coast. And Ruskin had devised a plan to dispose of the convicts, after they had assisted him in the outrage. Therefore, after the homesteads had been burned, it would not be difficult to concoct a story of a native massacre of the white inhabitants. Probably, in the final analysis, Ruskin and his lieutenant, Johnson, could be made to appear as heroes, and thus draw rewards from the Company to supplement the immediate, lucrative booty from their villainies.

Had it not been for Tim Riley's defection, Ruskin's plan must have succeeded with little difficulty. O'Callaghan was worried about Tim. The little Irishman had been seen talking to the squatter on the track to Warrah. But Tim would probably have given Ruskin an acceptable explanation. Hadn't he succeeded in turning O'Callaghan back?

Even assuming that Tim got through to Port Stephens without mishap, it would be at least a fortnight before help for the settlers could be expected from that quarter, and a month before any relief could come from Sydney. And Tim had said that Ruskin had proposed to act within the week.

The squatters, therefore, would either have to stand and make a fight of it, or retreat out of the valley to the north, and remain there until help came. The latter course was most unpalatable. O'Callaghan craved to fight it out with Ruskin, and have done with the scoundrel once and for all. But he would advise the temporary evacuation of the valley, as the soundest plan of action.

The members of the household were still asleep when the weary squatter reached the homestead. He slipped into Alex Wade's room, and awakened him. Alex had heard from Abo a little of what was afoot, but O'Callaghan's story staggered him. On no account, however, would he agree to leave the valley.

'What!' he said. 'Let those mongrels burn my homestead, and destroy my stock, while I slink like a dingo in the mountains? No, Cal; I'll fight it out with 'em, even if I have to do it alone.'

'You won't have to do that, Alex,' said O'Callaghan quietly. 'It's all right for us, but what about the womenfolk—Nance and Mollie and Mary Kane? They're the people we have to consider.'

'Couldn't we get 'em down to Loder's at Cuerindie?' asked Alex.

'That seems possible. We'd have to pass Warrah, but we could go well inland. Provided, of course, that the women will agree to go.'

'We'll see,' said Alex. 'But you'd better get some sleep, Cal. You're done in. Will I dig you up something to eat?'

'No thanks, Alex. I'll sleep first and eat afterwards.'

'Climb into my bunk, then,' said Alex. 'I'll send a couple of men up to the Wallabadahs this morning to watch those convict mongrels. We'll discuss things further after you've had a rest.'

When O'Callaghan awakened, he ate a good meal and felt



better, and more optimistic. Nance came to him. She told him flatly that neither she nor Mollie would go to Loder's. 'We're all in this together, Martin,' she said, 'and we'll see it out together.'

O'Callaghan was annoyed.

'Do you realize that this is going to be war, Nance?' he asked. 'That men are going to be killed before this is over? The Golden Valley will be no place for a woman during the next week or so.'

'On the contrary, Martin, I think it will be,' she replied. 'If men are going to be killed, some are going to be wounded; and you'll need women to care for them. We're staying here, Martin. I've told Dad, and he agrees. But I think you should try to bring Mrs. Kane over here, if she'll come.'

Nance having made up her mind, O'Callaghan had to give in. But he thought it would be wise for the whole of the Kane establishment to move across, if possible. With the combined forces of the three homesteads linked as one unit against them, the convicts would have little chance of success.

O'Callaghan proposed to Wade that the valley should be defended at the pass through the Wallabadah Mountains and that, to supplement the defending force, Joe Kane should be requested to transfer his station complement to Wade's. Alex agreed reluctantly. He didn't like Joe Kane, but he supposed that, under the circumstances, he would have to put up with the fellow for a few days. So after arranging for Bill Wade to ride up to the Wallabadahs to allow Abo and Svortzen to take periods of rest, O'Callaghan set out for Kane's and arrived there at dusk.

Joe Kane wanted to know what all the mystery of the past few days portended. O'Callaghan had practically accused Alf Dillon of complicity in some cattle-killing plot. Then he had ridden off, and had come back with a blackfellow. He and the blackfellow had been last seen heading towards Yellow Mountain. Alf Dillon, naturally, was savage and wild over the whole business; and Joe was puzzled. What did it all mean? O'Callaghan explained. He apologized to Alf Dillon for having doubted him. Alf was magnanimous. It reminded him of a number of things which were hardly relevant. But Joe

Kane was not as impressed with the seriousness of the threat to the valley as the impending danger dictated he should be.

'Isn't it possible, Cal,' he suggested, 'that your Irish convict friend was bluffing? Supposing he was well paid to tell that yarn, so as to frighten us out of the valley? Couldn't Ruskin have fixed that up, just the same as he's worked this cattle-killin' business?'

'Not Tim,' said O'Callaghan. 'He wouldn't be a party to anything like that. Not where I'm concerned.'

'But surely, Cal, the Colonial Pastoral Company wouldn't be so damned foolish as to countenance cold-blooded, wilful murder. Half their directors 'ud be swingin' as soon as it was over.'

'You're-mistaken, Joe,' O'Callaghan said patiently. 'The Colonial Pastoral Company has nothing to do with this. I believe the Company authorized Ruskin to negotiate in its name, to try to buy us out. Ruskin failed there, and lost his chance of a commission of some sort. This latest scheme is his own. As I've told you, the man's a murderer—a convicted murderer—and the leopard doesn't change his spots. He has seen a chance for heavy plunder here, with no danger of being detected. What does it matter to him if wholesale murder is involved? That is merely incidental. The natives are to get the blame—that's his idea. Now do you see the need for action?'

For a moment Joe sat pondering. When finally he spoke he was emphatic.

'Yes, by hell I do, Cal. I believe you're right. What have you got in mind to do?'

O'Callaghan explained what had been done so far.

'Wade and I had a long discussion this morning,' he said. 'Our main difficulty is that we are uninformed concerning the precise time when Ruskin intends to attack. Tim said this week; but he doesn't really know definitely. So Wade and I have arranged to keep two men watching, day and night, on the northern slopes of the Wallabadahs. Wade's two station hands, Abo and Svortzen, went up there this morning. Then Bill Wade rode up, to give them a chance to sleep by relieving

them turn about. Alex and the girls are remaining in the homestead, strengthening the defence there for us if necessary. But I don't think that will be needed. The scheme is to drive the convicts back from the Wallabadahs, if possible—or at least to hold them there until help arrives. In that way the women will be kept away from the fighting. But if Ruskin's crowd should break through the pass we can retreat to Wade's homestead. I think, though, that an ambush in the Wallabadah pass will destroy Ruskin's lust for murder.'

'Sounds a pretty good scheme, Cal,' Joe replied. 'Where do we come into the picture?'

'Your place here would be the last to receive attention, Joe. I want you to join up with Wades. Mrs. Kane and the two Wade girls will be better together, and with our forces united we'll be much stronger.'

Joe scowled as he considered this proposition. Then John interposed.

'There's no sense in keeping up this silly wranglin', Dad, when all our lives and property are in danger.'

Joe almost exploded. His face turned crimson.

'What d'yer mean, boy?' he roared. 'Silly wranglin' be damned! Didn't Alex Wade come up here and rob me of half my grass? You talk about silly wranglin'. I'll fight for my family, and my own property, but I won't fire a rifle for any damned Wade.'

Joe, said O'Callaghan quietly, 'do you remember the night, on Yellow Creek, when Wade was attacked by the natives?'

'That was different,' said Joe. 'There were women—All right. I suppose it's the same again. I'll be a good neighbour to the grass thieves, and help 'em out of their trouble.'

'Right. We'll leave as soon as we can in the morning. I won't feel easy in my mind until I'm back at the homestead again. Pack up what valuables you have. Take a few blankets and all of the rifles and ammunition. That will be all you'll require. There'll be ample room for you at Wade's homestead, since most of the menfolk will be camping in the Wallabadahs.'

As Kane's homestead was to be deserted for some time, there were various matters to be attended to before a start

could be made. It was noon of the next day before the little cavalcade was ready for departure.

Before she left, Mary Kane spent a few minutes by the graves behind the house. She wept a little as the party turned its horses westward. This was her home—it was part of her. She could not leave it, lonely and deserted, without a pang of remorse. The menfolk, stoic and silent as the trees around them, faced resolutely towards the west, each subjected to the emotions peculiar to his own particular nature. But all had a feeling in common—that within a few days they would return here, to the old life of peace and toil.

During the ride, O'Callaghan's mind became a prey to depression. His superior intelligence, experience, and the strength of his personality had thrust him into the position of leader of the settlers, and the responsibility hung heavily upon him. He was just a little afraid—not for himself, but for Nance. He needed all the determination of his powerful will to dispel the thoughts of failure which constantly attacked him.\*

John, on the other hand, rode with buoyant spirits and a heart filled with elation. All of the young man's dormant, adventurous and romantic spirits rose to the surface as he realized that now was his opportunity to win or lose the love of the girl whom he cherished. For a short time, at least, enmity between the two families would disappear. During that time he would fight for her—die for her, if necessary—do anything to prove himself worthy of her. Her father had asked him to wait, but that wouldn't matter now. Everything would be changed. After the convicts had been rendered incapable of further molesting the valley, he would tell her of his affection.

As the cavalcade forded Yellow Creek and wheeled towards the north, John grew uneasy. He drew Charcoal alongside O'Callaghan's mount and urged, he told himself, by a desire to be exactly where he could be of the most help, he made a suggestion.

'Cal,' he said, 'it'd save a lot of time and useless riding if I was to cut across from here and join up with the others in the

mountains. You wouldn't need to come up, then, until the morning. What do you say?'

'A very good plan, John,' O'Callaghan replied. 'But what about Mollie, lad?'

John remained silent, turning away to hide his embarrassment.

'All right, then,' O'Callaghan said with a smile. 'Allan can go with you, and you can start right away and make a camp. Take your rifles and blankets. After tea I'll ride up with a load of provisions, and we'll make ourselves as comfortable as we can.'

O'Callaghan gave John careful instructions concerning the whereabouts of Abo and Svortzen, and the need to keep themselves well hidden, lest Ruskin should have sentries posted still on the southern end of the pass. With a cheery farewell the two young men turned south-west, as the others continued north, along the course of the creek.

The party reached the stock-yard, and the men were about to dispose of their horses when Alex Wade emerged from the house and came forward to meet them. As he approached, his bronzed face provided an interesting study in expression. When he first caught sight of the quartet riding out of the timber, his emotion was one of relief that his hitherto meagre defences were now reinforced. But now came a revulsion or feeling, in which hospitality and gratitude, pride and hatred, vied with each other for predominance.

As his enemy drew near, Joe Kane sat rigid upon his horse, studying Alex critically. Joe's battle with himself was fought before he left his homestead. He was able now, in a disinterested way, to watch the conflict of emotions through which Wade was evidently passing.

Alex doffed his battered old cabbage-tree hat in deference to the wife of his enemy. Then he acknowledged O'Callaghan's greeting. Joe Kane dismounted from his horse, and held out his hand.

'Wade,' he said crisply, 'you and me don't love each other, but we've got one thing in common. We're up against murderers and cut-throats. We'll stick together and be friends

till them damned scoundrels are all shot or hung. Then you go your way, and I'll go mine.'

Alex hesitated for a moment, then grasped the extended hand and shook it firmly.

'Thanks,' was all he said as he turned abruptly and beckoned his neighbours towards his house.

Through a bedroom window facing south Mollie had been watching anxiously. She saw the two men confront each other. She saw the hand extended in friendship, and her father grasp it. She ran lightly from the room, through the hall to the kitchen, and threw her arms around the neck of her industrious sister.

'Nance!' she cried excitedly. 'Oh, Nance, they're friends, Mr. Kane and Dad have just shaken hands. I saw them. Oh, isn't it wonderful? I could almost love that horrible old convict for being the cause of this.'

Nance caressed her sister tenderly, and smoothed her wayward tresses.

'I'm more than glad, for your sake, Mollie,' she whispered, 'because I think I know all that it means to you.'

Then the others came in, and there were formal introductions. For a time the atmosphere was a little strained. At the meal-table Alex Wade grew silent and taciturn, finding it difficult to accustom himself to this new scheme of things. Philosophically, Joe Kane took everything for granted, and said very little. But the warm hospitality and homeliness of the two Wade girls soon dispelled any feelings of embarrassment. With the appetite of a woman starving for the companionship of her own sex, Mary Kane grasped at the friendship which Nance and Mollie so warmly extended to her. Alf Dillon rejoiced that now Fate had thrown him in with people who might appreciate his descriptions of the wonderful experiences which crowded the record of his eventful life. O'Callaghan, having overcome the depressive feeling which had disturbed him during the afternoon, deliberately steered the talk away from the subject of Ruskin and his atrocities; and in this he was ably assisted by Alf and his reminiscences.

After the company had risen from the table, Nance went to

her room for some article of feminine toilet. She returned hurriedly, her face somewhat blanched.

'Martin,' she cried, 'there's something scratching on the wall of my room beneath the window. Will you go out and see what it is?'

O'Callaghan went outside. There was a half-moon shining, and the stars were bright, but no animate object was in sight. The squatter completed a circuit of the house, and was about to return when his attention was attracted by something a little unnatural in the call of a mopoke down by the creek. He answered the cry softly, and then he saw the tall form of an aboriginal, standing in the moonlight, on the edge of the clearing. O'Callaghan strode towards him. It was Bru Bri.

The chief told O'Callaghan of the events leading up to the defection of Biraban. Bru Bri was certain that the 'evil magic' had been supplied by Ruskin and his colleagues, and that the ultimate destruction of the Moonbi race was involved. O'Callaghan was sceptical of this.

'The white man can have no motive for desiring to destroy your people, Bru Bri,' he said, 'unless he fears you, and you have given him no cause for that. You have not been in contact with him. Still, the Company's men must have left the evil water where Biraban could find it, unless your brother sneaked into their camp and stole it from them. That is very unlikely, though, because the Eagle-hawk has never before tasted the white man's evil drink. He would not drink it unless he got very close, and the smell attracted him. Did Biraban tell you why he was down within sight of the Warrah gunyahs?'

'Biraban did as you asked him to do, Piriwallan. He followed in the tracks of the evil slayers of cattle. He told me nothing more.'

'Then the convicts must have placed the drink on the tracks, where it would attract his attention. They have some deep and evil motive, but what it is I cannot say.'

'The men of evil magic desire to destroy my tribe. They have ruined many tribes, by the Big Water, in this way.'

Piriwallan, how can I prevent them?' Bru Bri's words were earnest and appealing.

O'Callaghan was thoughtful. The demoralization of the natives must fit into Ruskin's plans somewhere.

'Bru Bri,' he said, 'my tribe is going to fight these evil people shortly. Many of them will be killed. The rest will be sent back to the Big Water for punishment, and good white men will take their places. So the evil ones will trouble your tribe no further. But some mischief has been done already. Biraban will return again to the Moonbis, and he will have more of the white man's rum. You must keep him, and those other warriors who are with him, away from your people.'

Bru Bri stood with bowed head. Then he straightened up and heaved a great sigh.

'Biraban is my brother, Piriwallan,' he said simply, 'and I love him. But, to save my people, I will drive him from my hunting-grounds. He is well liked, and some of my warriors may go with him—I cannot say. But a weak tribe can be strengthened. A tribe filled with lust for the white man's evil drink will soon be no tribe at all. Piriwallan, my warriors will fight for you, to drive these men of evil magic from their hunting-grounds for ever.'

'No, Bru Bri, the white men must fight their own battles. If the black man interferes it may set the Great Chief by the Big Water against him. Go back to your tribe, and remain in the Moonbis with your people until all this is over.'

Bru Bri agreed. Piriwallan was ever a wise and considerate man in his dealings with the black people. The chief turned on his heel and faded into the shadows of the timber.

O'Callaghan returned to the house, where the others were anxiously awaiting him.

'More of Ruskin's devilry,' he said. 'Somehow he got hold of Biraban when the native was hiding in the scrub near Warrah, and gave him a taste for rum. The young fellow has gone back looking for more. That was Bru Bri outside. He came to tell me and to seek advice.'

'What did you tell him, Cal?' asked Wade.



'I advised him to outlaw Biraban. He can do nothing else—for the time being, anyway.'

'What effect will this have on us, do you think?' Joe Kane queried.

'Nothing, I hope; but I don't know. Ruskin's not throwing good rum away for nothing. But I must be leaving now if I am to be in the Wallabadahs before daylight.'

In this hour of extreme danger farewells were naturally protracted. When at last O'Callaghan broke away, Alex Wade accompanied him to his horse. Alex vigorously protested against remaining inactive himself, but O'Callaghan impressed the settler with the need for protecting the women, making it essential that someone should remain with them.

'As the father of the girls, Alex, it is your duty to stay at home. And Joe Kane should remain with his wife. Those of us who have none depending on us should face the immediate danger. If by some mischance the Warrah crowd should elude us, you will have all of the fighting you want. But with you and Joe Kane and Alf Dillon here, one of you will be able to come to us for help if necessary.'

'All right, Cal. You're the boss,' Wade said. 'Anyway,' he added, as though to console himself, 'we won't be idle here. You'll notice I've cut a lot of timber away on the north side of the house. If they happen to drive you back they won't get much protection there. To-morrow I'll get Alf on the job, and we'll fix up the house a bit. It's better to be as prepared as we can, isn't it?'

'Certainly, Alex. I'd suggest you cut away some of that timber from the creek frontage. I know the trees there are rather solid, but a few removed here and there will open it up a great deal and make the house much safer.'

'Yes, Cal. Them river gums are tough, but we should be able to shift some of 'em. Make sure you get a message down if things are going bad up in the hills.'

'I will, Alex. You make sure you keep a good watch out at night time. We'll all be back, safe and sound, within a few days.'

'Good-bye, Cal; and good luck. I wish I was going with you.'

O'Callaghan rode away into the deep darkness of the forest, trusting to his horse, laden with food, powder and bullets, to find the easiest path over the rough and broken ground. As the night grew older, the country became more rugged, making the journey slow, hazardous and tedious. When the squatter entered the rugged foothills of the Wallabadahs the dawn was breaking, and he began to climb upward, towards the pass through the mountains.

He knew precisely where to locate the settlers' camp; but the fear that some of Ruskin's men might be prowling in the mountains urged him to keep to the lower valleys, where the heavy timber would screen him from prying eyes. It was daylight now, and O'Callaghan pressed his horse to greater speed, riding between the maze of towering foothills, where a lesser bushman would soon become hopelessly lost.

As the golden sunlight began to filter between the leaves of box and stringy bark, the squatter paused on the rim of a little basin, set deep in the heart of the mountains, some two miles west of the highest point of the Wallabadah pass. A hundred feet below him, a tiny pool of water gleamed through the overhanging branches, glistening in the light reflected from the precipitous face of the opposite wall. A similar unscalable barrier bounded the eastern side of the basin. But on the west, the mountain, though steep, admitted of careful descent, and for this O'Callaghan rode. A low call greeted him, as his horse began to climb down, and he saw Allan Kane standing beside the pool.

The squatter reached the bottom and examined his surroundings. A few paces back from the water-hole—which, he noticed now, was fed from a spring on the western side of the basin—there were two small huts of bark and brambles, hidden from above by the foliage of the trees. In the timber, horses grazed contentedly on the soft couch and kangaroo grass in which the basin abounded.

O'Callaghan dismounted and, with Allan's assistance, removed the provisions and ammunition from his horse, and carried them

to the nearest of the shelters. Allan informed him that John Kane and Abo had left the camp on foot, at daybreak, to relieve Bill Wade and Svortzen from their all-night vigil on the pass.

The men were faithfully carrying out O'Callaghan's plan, Allan explained. They were keeping a continuous watch on the entrance to the Golden Valley from a point whence they could see some distance down the southern slopes of the mountains. Allan would climb up to the top, when Bill Wade and Svortzen returned to the basin to sleep. Should Ruskin's men be sighted during the day, Allan would hasten back and awaken the others, so that they could play their parts in the ambush.

Satisfied that all was in order, O'Callaghan spread his blanket on the ground, and, tired out from his night's ride, was soon fast asleep.

The sound of low conversation awakened him. The basin was bathed in shadow, and the air was filled with the fragrant odour of steaming coffee. The squatter rose and turned towards the shelter of the eastern wall, where Bill Wade and Carl Svortzen were preparing a meal over a tiny fire.

After the men had eaten, the fire was extinguished, and the three men shouldered their rifles and ascended the western wall of the basin, rising from the shadowy depths of their camping place to the rugged bushland, painted in saffron and gold by the soft, diffused rays of the setting sun. The settlers surmounted the rim, circled the basin, and set off east towards the Wallabadah pass to relieve their comrades. After tramping steadily for an hour, they reached a bluff overlooking the Port Stephens track and the southern slopes of the mountains. Occasionally they caught a glimpse, through the trees, of the tiny twinkles of light where the Warrah camp lay, miles away to the south.

A few words were exchanged. The tired sentries headed west, towards a welcome supper and sleep. The new arrivals took up their positions on both sides of the track. The diminutive moon rose over the mountain-tops. A dingo howled from a distant peak. Near at hand, its mate made answer. The hoot of a screech-owl sounded from an apple tree overhanging the pass, the death-like shriek echoing from the sombre bastions of

the Wallabadahs. Hawk-eyed and silent, the men sat watching, alert for anything, apart from the usual sights and sounds of the night.

## CHAPTER XV

### A WOMAN'S SACRIFICE

THE day following O'Callaghan's departure was a busy one for those who remained at the homestead. From early dawn, Joe Kane, Alex Wade and Alf Dillon had been thinning out the dense scrub which lay on the northern and eastern sides of the house; so that, in the event of a retreat upon the building, Ruskin and his followers should be deprived of the protection which the timber might afford them. The girls, and Mary Kane, were active too, cooking the large supply of fresh beef with which the house had been stocked.

A wise and conscientious adjutant to the capable O'Callaghan, Alex saw to it that, should the vanguard in the Wallabadahs fail, the homestead would not fall into the hands of the convicts through any mistake of his. Everything possible which might assist the settlers was quickly and efficiently carried out. Nothing was left to chance.

When night came, the members of the household gained what rest they could, in between turns at watching. On the following morning, they turned once more to their tasks. There was no report from the party in the mountains, but Alex felt no anxiety. The silence merely showed that the convicts had not attacked as yet. But, as the time for the inevitable battle drew near, Alex became restless. Nothing more could be done at home. The defences were well prepared. He wanted to see for himself the position in the Wallabadahs. He consulted with Joe Kane and Alf Dillon. They were content for him to go. A day and a night away from the homestead would make no difference; and it was of importance to all that they should have news from the mountains. So, at daybreak,

Alex took his leave of his family and his companions, and rode south.

The day wore on. Nance, Mollie and Mary Kane were in the kitchen, washing up and chatting amicably together. There seemed to be no end to the things which the girls had to show their new companion, and there were endless things to talk about. On the wide veranda, Joe Kane paced up and down, smoking and thinking. Alf Dillon had gone to the stock-yard to feed the horses. Joe expected him back, shortly, when they would go down to the creek front together, and grub out a few more of the tall and knotted gums. But when Alf returned his face was pale, his breath came quickly, a puzzled frown lined his forehead.

'It's a singular blarsted thing, Joe,' he gasped quickly, 'an' I hope there's no confounded complications attached; but Alex Wade's horse jist come back, with blood all over the saddle.'

'Hell! Get my rifle, Alf. I'll see if I can find him.'

Before the rails of the stock-yard the horse stood dejectedly, the bridle rein trailing in front of it, its saddle and mane coated and clammy with blood. One glance was enough. Joe saddled his own horse, snatched his rifle from the bewildered Alf, shouted to the stockman to get inside the house, bar up the doors and see that the women had rifles; and then he galloped away.

Strange that Joe Kane should be riding hard into unknown dangers, intent only on saving the life of his enemy. Yet not so strange, to those who have belonged to the vast fraternity of the bush. It is commonplace for men to fall out over some trivial thing, for the rancour of their quarrels to burn deep into their souls, until a deadly hatred has grown between them, increasing in intensity as time goes by. But when one of these men meets with an accident, or some other form of serious trouble, his erstwhile enemy is often the first to succour him. There is a certain chivalry born into the Australian bushman's character, which surpasses the worst of his passions.

Following Alex's tracks, Joe Kane rode on, eyes and ears alert for signs of danger. Riding through a little gulley, flanked by wattle scrub and broken boulders, he heard a strange whirring sound, not unlike the swish of a 'wonga pigeon. He was

considering whether or not he would stop and investigate when he heard it again. This time the thing passed so close to him that the wind of it fanned his cheeks. Joe drew rein quickly, and as he did so, a spear zipped by with a hiss and stuck, quivering, in a tree to the right of the track. Joe spurred his horse, at the same time jerking his long rifle from its sheath. A sharp glance to his left as the horse bounded forward; then he whipped the weapon to his shoulder, and as quickly lowered it again. With a cry of pain, he clapped his hand to his thigh. The tall, clay-daubed warrior hiding behind the bole of a tree had been too quick for him. Joe compressed his lips and drew the spear from his leg.

A hundred yards farther on, he came upon the prostrate form of Alex Wade. The settler lay in a cluster of broken rocks, his body transfixed by a number of spears. To Joe's amazement, he still lived.

Glancing quickly around him, Joe lowered his wounded leg to the ground and dismounted. He limped to Alex's side, wincing with pain at every step. A blackfellow flitted from a tree a hundred yards away to another some twenty paces closer. And twenty paces closer still, a native stepped boldly into the open, fitting a spear to his womerah as he moved. With a curse, Joe fired point blank. The native threw up his arms and fell forward on his stomach, his ear-splitting death-shriek echoing through the bush.

'That'll keep 'em quiet for a while,' Joe muttered, as he quickly rammed another charge into his rifle. Then he knelt beside his fallen rival.

Alex opened his eyes and looked at Joe; then his pale lips smiled in recognition.

'They've done for me, Joe,' he said feebly. 'It was kind of you to come.'

'You're not finished yet, Alex,' Joe said. 'Let me get you on to my horse, and I'll take you home.'

'No, Joe. I know I'm done. They caught me nappin'. Never had a chance to fire a shot. They've left me alone for a while. Thought I was dead. They're not like ordinary blacks. They're mad. Fight 'em, Joe. Don't let the black

devils into the homestead. Fight 'em, Joe. Wipe 'em all out. Don't—let—'em—get—my—girls.'

The last words cost the dying man a superhuman effort. Wearily, he tried to extend a shaking hand. A convulsive shudder rattled his body. With a clean soul, and a smile on his lips, Alex Wade went to meet his Maker. He had forgiven his enemy.

Now that it was all over, Joe became more conscious of his wound. He ripped a few strips of flannel from his shirt, made a rough pad and bandage, and staunched the flow of blood as much as he could. The question then arose in his mind as to how to dispose of poor Alex's remains. He decided to try to get the body on to his horse, and take it back to the homestead. But, faint from loss of blood, he was not equal to the task. Then he realized that he would serve Alex better by hastening back to the assistance of his daughters. And Mary, too, was in danger now. So he limped to his horse and struggled into the saddle.

The blacks, he knew, were keeping out of range, but would close in if they saw an opportunity. Caution now was useless. They were watching his every movement, so he put his horse to a gallop, trusting in furious speed to carry him through the hidden ranks of the enemy, and to upset their marksmanship. As he rode, spears zipped by, boomerangs whirled. Joe turned once, to see a painted native following him. Raising his rifle he shot the blackfellow dead in his tracks. Onward he galloped; heedless of broken ground and overhanging branches; intent only on winning through, to the rescue of his wife and the daughters of his fallen enemy.

Suffering agonies from the pain in his leg, his senses numbed, his head dizzy, he arrived at the homestead at last. Mary Kane was the first to reach the door as her husband reeled from the saddle.

'Joe,' she cried, aghast, 'whatever's——'

'Alex's killed by blacks,' he said. 'They'll probably attack the homestead.'

Joe grasped the door-jamb to support himself. A haze seemed to come before his eyes. As though in a dream he saw Nance, her face drawn and pale, supporting her fainting sister. He

saw Alf Dillon jump towards him. Then his iron will gave way, and he fell swooning to the floor.

Alf and Mary Kane carried him to Wade's bedroom, where his wife administered stimulants. Alf returned to the dining-room. The two girls were weeping. Nance dried her eyes as the boundary rider entered. Her face, though pale, was firm. There was a determined light in her eyes.

'Mr. Dillon,' she said, 'we're in grave danger, and you're the only man here now capable of fighting. I'm going to ride to the Wallabadahs for help.'

Alf looked startled, and dived in his pocket for his pipe—a necessary aid to clear thinking. Still a little dazed, Mollie clung to her sister's arm. Finally, Alf had his pipe in his mouth, and his answer was emphatic.

'It's no confounded use, young woman, in no manner of speakin',' he said. 'You'd never get there alive.'

'Then I'll go.'

The interruption came from Mollie.

'I can shoot and ride as well as any man. I'll get through.'

Nance motioned her to be silent.

'Bru Bri will never permit his warriors to harm me,' she said. 'He knows I am betrothed to Martin, and he and Martin are friends. There's something about this which I can't understand. Dad must have offended the natives in some way, but I know I'll be safe. Whether you like it or not, Mr. Dillon, I'm going for help. You can't come, Mollie. There'll be an attack here, and you'll be needed. But pray to God that I get there in time to save us all.'

Alf was irresolute, undecided whether to allow Nance to take this risk or to restrain her and endeavour to hold out against the blacks, until the men returned from the mountains after Ruskin had been defeated. That would probably take some time. He wished Joe were conscious to decide for him, but a peep into the room revealed his employer breathing regularly, but still oblivious to his surroundings. Meanwhile, Nance was acting on her own initiative, preparing for departure. Alf read the determined expression on her sorrow-clouded features and shook his head sadly. 'He could only restrain her by force,



and after all, there was something in the argument which she had advanced.

Taking a loaded rifle, Nance ran to the stock-yard, mounted her poor father's horse and set him, at a fast canter, towards the south. Although she felt that, in some way, the rum of which Bru Bri had spoken to Martin was responsible for the death of her father, she was at a loss to understand, if the blacks were intoxicated, how they could have succeeded in surprising an experienced bushman. She was satisfied that it must have been a surprise; for if her father had had wind of the natives, well-mounted as he was, he certainly would have outwitted them.

Nance prayed a little as she drew away from the friendly atmosphere of the homestead, and entered the lonely bush. The silence of the forest, and its hidden dangers, tempered her bravado. But, with prayer, some of her confidence returned to her. Then, as an inspiration to her romantic nature, came the full realization that the fate of the valley hung on her shoulders. This served to soften, somewhat, the grief occasioned by the death of her father. So she rode boldly on, scorning the little stabs of fear which occasionally struck at her.

The sunlight, filtering through the foliage of the trees, traced a pattern of shadow and gold on the grassy floor of the open forest. Overhead, the gentle breezes sighed, softly caressing the branches. Little wrens and finches twittered happily in the wattle thickets. Even the pad of the horse's hoofs seemed muffled. Breathing this atmosphere of peace, it was difficult for Nance to realize that, but a few hours ago, tragedy had been enacted not many miles from here. It seemed incredible that, somewhere in this tranquil, inoffensive bushland, Death had claimed her strong and virile father; and that she, his daughter, was confidently braving, alone, the perils to which he had succumbed.

She became nervous again as she commenced to cross the great stretch of broken country leading up to the Wallabadahs. Her eyes wanted to wander from the track—to search the shadows of rocks and giant apple butts—but she set her teeth firmly, and resolutely kept her gaze concentrated forward.

While skirting a little box-covered hillock, she had an instinctive feeling that she was being watched. She determined to appear undisturbed, but the restraint which she had imposed upon herself began to weaken.

And then she was certain. Someone was in the timber. There were no sounds unrelated to the usual noises of the bush, yet her intuition told her that someone was there, watching her every movement and, in all probability, following her.

Riding man fashion, Nance urged her horse to greater speed, and, crossing an open glade, glanced furtively to her right. A young aboriginal, in full and grotesque war-paint, emerged from the scrub and beckoned to her to stop. She saw only a horribly marked savage, and spurred her horse. A quick glance over her shoulder, and she saw that he was running, keeping pace with her. She looked again, more searchingly, and through the clay daubs and weird streaks of ochre, she recognized Biraban, the young man whom she had nursed after the terrible fight at the homestead. She reined in her horse abruptly—allowing him to approach.

Biraban knew only a few words of English. He stood beside her horse, and his breath reeked of rum.

'Inargung live,' he said, pointing at her with the shaft of his spear. 'Piriwallan live.' Then, extending his arms to take in the whole valley, he uttered the one word, 'Die!'

The aroma of spirits solved the whole problem for Nance in a flash. Ruskin had bribed some of the natives with rum, and promises of more rum, to assist in the war of extermination against the settlers. The insidious fire-water was burning out the souls of these simple bushmen. They would kill—they would do anything for Ruskin to get more of it. They had revolted against their chief, but the inborn sense of gratitude, which is a characteristic of the aboriginal nature, compelled Biraban to assist Nance and O'Callaghan to escape.

'Biraban,' said Nance, 'did you kill my father?'

Biraban indicated that he did not understand. What did it matter? Nance set off again along the track towards the south.

Through the maze of foothills she rode, afraid sometimes of

losing her way, and ever conscious of the presence of Biraban, keeping pace with her in the scrub. Evidently, the native was following her to ensure that she and Martin left the valley immediately. She wondered what would happen when O'Callaghan heard her story. Probably, the men would form together and drive straight through the blacks, to the relief of the homestead. The natives would stand no chance against such a well-armed onslaught. In the meantime, the homestead should remain in comparative safety. Nance lost the track and spent some time making circling movements, trying to find it again. Eventually, she picked up hoof marks and continued on. Biraban was still following, but she had no cause now for fear.

The sun was setting when she began to ascend the pass through the main Wallabadah range, staining the cloud-blotched heavens with patches of orange and with streaks of deep crimson. The girl turned in the saddle, as she spelled her horse after an unusually steep climb, and her wandering gaze roved over the panoramic view behind her. The Golden Valley lay wrapped in shadow, except where an occasional hill rose boldly out of the plain, catching the gold and crimson rays of the setting sun. The purple Moonbis reared their shaggy heads into the crimson sky, as though some ruthless, giant artist had painted their features with blood. In the Wallabadahs, the surrounding crags and precipices were still and silent as death.

Nance urged her horse onward, up the steep and dangerous path. When, finally, she reached the crest of the Wallabadahs, a man emerged from the shelter of a rock. Nance dismounted and, losing all restraint in the realization that her mission was accomplished, fell, sobbing, into O'Callaghan's arms.

She regained her composure and related the story of her father's death, and of her meeting with Biraban. O'Callaghan asked a few curt questions, then gave a low whistle. Bill Wade appeared from the other side of the track, and came running towards them.

'Bill,' said O'Callaghan, rapidly, 'run to the camp and tell the others to ride across here as fast as they can. Bring your own horse, mine and Svortzen's, and all the ammunition. Don't waste time over anything else. Hurry.'

With a curious glance at his sister, Bill sped away westward. The girl turned once more to O'Callaghan, who seemed to have fixed his eyes on some definite point in the timber.

'Martin,' she said, 'I think Biraban followed me up here to see if we would take his advice.'

'I am sure he did,' came the soft reply. 'He's over there watching us now. His opinion of me has degenerated with his nature, apparently. Biraban!' he called loudly. '*Tanan uwolla*—come here!'

Nance saw the blackfellow emerge from the scrub, and immediately, her companion began a rapid fire of aboriginal phrases. She could not understand what Martin was saying, but she gathered, from the scowl which clouded the native's swarthy, painted features, that it was anything but complimentary.

When the squatter had finished, Biraban turned abruptly and, without uttering a word, walked sullenly away.

'That fellow's dangerous, Nance,' O'Callaghan said, as he watched the retreating figure. 'The rum has played on his mind so much that he is almost adoring it as his god. He resents my speaking against it, as though I were committing a sacrilege. I told him—— Look out!'

The squatter whipped his rifle to his shoulder and fired. But in that fraction of a second between Biraban's halt and the report of O'Callaghan's rifle, the damage had been done. The squatter heard the death shriek of the warrior, and felt the brush of the girl's flying hair as she fell before him. Then he stood, momentarily petrified, at the sight of the wicked spear shaft protruding from her breast.

He caught her gently in his arms and laid her quivering form on the soft grass. He made a quick examination. It was the end. She was beyond help. The native weapon, meant for him, had pierced the heart which had loved him so loyally.

Frantic with the agony of the moment, O'Callaghan bent over her, his eyes filled with tears. He whispered her name. He begged her not to leave him—crying one moment, praying the next. If she would only return to consciousness. If only

he could see those beautiful eyes shine once more. If only he could speak to her.

'Oh, God!' he cried in anguish, 'do not take her from me yet.'

A spasm of pain shot across her pallid features. Then her eyes opened, and her lips expanded in a fleeting smile.

'Martin,' she whispered, 'Dad is calling me. I must go to him. Fight for Mollie and save her from them. Don't say anything—I haven't time— Kiss me—Martin.'

O'Callaghan, sobbing like a child, held her quivering body in his arms.

'Nance, Nance,' he cried. 'I'll follow you soon. I'll kill every blackfellow in the valley, then I'll follow you.'

'Save Mollie from them, Martin. Save her and keep her good and clean and . . .'

Her failing voice died away to an almost inaudible whisper; then the long dark lashes flickered again.

'I am coming, Dad,' she breathed. 'Say a prayer for me, Martin. Oh, my dear—I—loved—you—so.'

With her last words ringing in his ears, a terrible rage consumed O'Callaghan's soul. He wanted to take his rifle, to ride on a relentless campaign of revenge, shooting, shooting, killing; until, finally, he himself fell a victim and joined her in that other world where sorrow was unknown.

But no. He must pull himself together—banish this blind, passionate anger. The natives were not to blame. This was Ruskin's doing. Ruskin—why wasn't he hanged in England? Why did they ever let such a wild beast foul this fair country? Ruskin, the murderer of dear, sweet Nance.

'Oh, my dear, I loved you so.' Treasured words from a sweet and noble heart. With a great effort, O'Callaghan conquered his rage, and tried to restrain the grief of a broken heart. He must do this. He must defend the valley and bring Ruskin to justice. At least he must save Mollie, so that this great sacrifice should not have been completely in vain.

Reverently he kissed the smiling, marble features, and carried the remains to a soft spot a few yards to the west. Then, with the fighting axe of the fallen Biraban as his only tool, he dug a

shallow grave and buried her beneath a big box tree on the top of the Wallabadahs, overlooking the valley which she knew and loved so well. For a moment he knelt in prayer. Then he covered the grave with stones, cut a deep cross in the butt of the tree, and returned to the pass, a silent and sorrowful figure, to await the men with the horses.

Standing there in the gathering darkness, he made superhuman efforts to concentrate on the formation of a plan for the relief of the homestead. But always his thoughts went back.

‘Oh, my dear, I loved you so.’

What did the Golden Valley matter now? What did anything matter? What was the use of protecting his holding? For him the charm of the valley had vanished for ever. The Angel of Death had deprived him of everything he had in the world. Let the Angel come quickly for him, so that he could join her. He hated the Golden Valley, once so dear to him. But no—this would never do. There was a job to be done—a job for Nance. She had begged him, with almost her last breath, to save her sister. He must do it, and he must save the valley as well, for Mollie and the Kane family, as Nance would have wished him to do. Then he would welcome death in whatever form it chose to take him.

And so he began to take stock of things around him. Bill should be back with the men and the horses shortly. Poor Bill! He had lost his father and his sister. How could he tell him? But, he wondered, where was Svortzen? The Swede had been keeping watch down the track on the southern slopes of the mountains not far away, and the report of O’Callaghan’s rifle must have reached him. Why had he not returned?

The squatter decided to search for him, but he had barely turned his face towards the south, when a rifle shot, close at hand, echoed through the mountains. It was followed swiftly by another, and, after a brief interval, by another.

Then came the sound of running footsteps, the crackle of breaking twigs and crash of dislodged stones. O’Callaghan instinctively looked to the priming of his rifle, then realized that he had not reloaded it after the shooting of Biraban. As

swiftly as possible, he repaired the omission, then stepped out into the centre of the pass, in time to see the staggering form of Svortzen come running around a bluff of rock which jutted out into the pass some twenty paces south from him.

The Swede's left arm hung loosely by his side, and his breath came in great gasps as he stopped beside O'Callaghan. Svortzen explained that he had dozed off for a short time, and the sentries from Warrah, evidently, had passed him without seeing him. The sound of O'Callaghan's rifle shot had awakened the Swede. The Warrah sentries, too, had heard it; and for a while they stood on the track, talking and listening, trying to determine what it was all about. Svortzen had tried to pass them, but they had seen him, and he ran away into the bush. Then, trying to find O'Callaghan, and being temporarily lost in the darkness, he had stumbled almost on top of one of the men from Warrah. There had been an exchange of shots, and the Swede had been hit in the arm.

'Carl's rifle empty,' he concluded. 'Carl run like hell and find you. Vy did you shoot, Cal?'

O'Callaghan ignored the question.

'Come behind the shelter of this rock, Carl,' he ordered, 'and let me have a look at your arm.'

The limb was not broken. It was merely a flesh wound, the bullet having pierced the biceps muscle. The squatter bound the wound with a strip of clothing. Then he instructed the Swede to remain there and rest for a while, and he slipped out into the faint moonlight of the pass. As nothing happened, he returned to the shelter of the rock, told the Swede what he intended to do and began to run rapidly south. After a few minutes, he emerged into the open pass once more.

The flickering lights of Warrah shone occasionally through the trees; but between them and the mountains the squatter fancied that he saw a faint glow, as though someone were lighting a pipe, and trying to conceal the flame. O'Callaghan slipped back into the timber and, lying prone upon his side, placed his ear to the ground. The rumble of galloping horses was plainly audible.

'Bill and the others returning to the pass,' he guessed, as he

continued to listen. With sudden abruptness the sound ceased, but a light, indistinct tapping took its place. Sometimes so faint that it faded away altogether, sometimes louder, like the distant hammering of stone breakers. O'Callaghan interpreted it as the hoof beats of horses moving leisurely up the mountain-side. He leapt swiftly to his feet and ran back to warn his companions.

Two shots rang out as the squatter raced across an open glade a quarter of a mile from the rock where he had left the Swede. Ignoring the zip of the bullets, O'Callaghan ran on, intent only on reaching the horses, dispersing the blacks, and relieving the Wade homestead before the approaching band of convict assassins could join their misguided, dusky allies.

The two Kanes, Abo and Bill Wade sat on their horses talking to Svortzen. O'Callaghan joined them. As he mounted, he told them, quickly, of the death of Nance and her father. Bill Wade made no comment. Fortunately, the darkness hid his features. O'Callaghan gave a few rapid instructions, then headed the entire party, at a hand-gallop, northward.

It was a silent cavalcade which raced recklessly through the scrub that night. The leader's heart was broken. His iron will controlling his emotions with difficulty, with firm-set lips, he kept his mind centred upon the stern duty before him. Behind rode the others, sullen and speechless, united in their desire for ruthless vengeance.

After riding in this fashion for about two hours O'Callaghan called a halt.

'The blacks would not have attacked until dark,' he said. 'But, by now, they have probably surrounded the homestead. The chances are that they are still half-drunk. The grog will have made reckless fools of some of them, and fighting maniacs of others. I think our best plan will be to make a quick and compact attack. We'll go slowly and quietly until I give the word; then draw your horses up close to mine and charge in a body, right up to the door of the house. Someone will recognize us and open it. We'll leave our horses then, and fight from inside. The blacks might become alarmed at the number of reinforcements, and abandon their attack.'



Bill Wade's thoughts were with his father and his murdered sister. He wanted revenge.

'Why not spread out and wipe the whole damned tribe out in the scrub, Cal?' he suggested, grimly.

'No, Bill. White men who tried to fight a tribe trained under Bru Bri in the open bush at night would be inviting disaster. Listen!'

The dull boom of a distant rifle shot sounded from the lower valley. It was followed by a faint chorus of high-pitched yells.

'We must hurry,' said O'Callaghan. 'They're attacking in earnest, and we'll have Ruskin's crowd upon us before morning.'

On they rode again, the squatter leading, the others lined out in single file behind him. The whip of the wind through his hair, the scent of the bush in his nostrils, the flecks of white foam flying from his sweating steed, and the impending battle, served as a balm to O'Callaghan's wounds. His eyes were keen as they roved across the moonlit patches on either side of the track.

Two miles from the homestead, the men slackened pace, and proceeded quietly and cautiously. The squatter caught a glimpse of a dark form flitting through the timber to the right of the track. The men moved a half-mile farther, then O'Callaghan spoke to John Kane, who rode next to him.

'John,' he said, softly. 'Pass the word back to the others to draw up level with me. We're going to charge.'

'Thank God,' came the almost inaudible reply. 'Mollie's in that house, Cal. It's nearly driven me mad.'

'I understand, lad. We'll soon be there now, and we'll save her, though the devil himself is against us. Your mother's there too, you know.'

Six foam-flecked horses drew into line, their riders leaning forward in their saddles, racing neck and neck, a compact defiant mass, along the rugged track leading to the homestead.

Occasionally a tree, looming up in the faint moonlight, broke the continuity of the line, but the obstacle passed, the ranks closed up again. An occasional spear zipped through the darkness, but the speeding mass of men and horses, black against

the dark background of the bush, made a difficult target for the native marksmen. Abo's horse was struck in the flank, but not seriously. A spear cut through the matted curls of O'Callaghan's head, barely missing his scalp. The party reached the edge of the clearing. Darkness enveloped the homestead. Dusky forms crouched silently in the shelter of the trees. With a wild shout, O'Callaghan forged ahead of the others, rode down an aboriginal who menaced him with his spear, charged across the clearing, and leaped from his horse's back, as the front door of the house opened to admit him.

The others were soon with him. As the squatter had predicted, the furious charge of horsemen had momentarily paralysed the blacks; and the men reached the interior of the house without any further trouble.

Mollie stood by the door as they trooped in, a smoking rifle in her hands, her face smudged with gunpowder, and her black curls strewn in disorder about her neck and shoulders. Yet, with all her dishevelled appearance, her dark eyes shining defiantly, the determined poise of her head and the faint smile of relief playing about her lips and dimpling her face, lent to her a certain degree of charm which, despite the grim circumstances, was not unnoticed by John Kane. The young man hesitated for a moment in the open doorway. O'Callaghan gripped him by the arm and drew him into the house, slamming and bolting the door behind him. As the door was shut, Mollie turned, the smile fading from her face.

'Where's Nance?' she queried, her face paling beneath its grimy coating.

All eyes were averted. No one could summon the courage to tell her. She eyed them curiously, nodded her head slightly as if in understanding, then commenced to reload her rifle.

O'Callaghan was astonished. He had expected a storm—tears—anything. He could not know of the change which the last few hours had wrought in this little bush maiden. The stern realities of life, the grim shadows of death, had converted the impetuous emotional child into a strong and courageous woman. Yet, what must have been her suffering? Following closely on the death of her father, she had lost now her only

remaining treasure, the companion who had been a mother to her from early childhood.

O'Callaghan caught the glimmer of unshed tears veiling her eyes—tears bravely suppressed, because this was not the time for them. Striding to where she stood by the ammunition table, the squatter put his arm tenderly about her shoulders and drew her to him.

'Mollie, my child,' he whispered. 'She's in a better land now. She died as she always lived—clean and happy.'

'I know,' came the soft reply.

She took his big hand in hers and patted it gently.

'Poor old Martin,' she said. 'How you must feel it.'

Outside, the night had grown calm and soundless. It almost looked as though the blacks had fulfilled the squatter's hopes. But the quiet was short-lived. The death shriek of an aboriginal pierced the still air, followed by a loud shout.

*'Bunkilla Bula! Bunkilla Bula!'*

Another death scream—almost at the very door.

With a bound, O'Callaghan had the bolts withdrawn and the door open.

'It's Bru Bri,' he shouted over his shoulder. 'I know his voice. He's in trouble. Come with me, two of you. The rest guard the house.'

But the squatter had no cause for alarm. With two stalwart warriors supporting him, screaming his terrible war-cry, the big chieftain emerged from the timber fringing the creek and, bending low, raced for the shelter of the house. O'Callaghan shouted a hasty welcome, bade the chief and his followers enter, then closed the door behind them, determined to use what respite he could in order to take stock of the homestead's defences.

When the men returned from the Wallabadahs, Mollie was the only person in the big dining-room, which it was her self-appointed task to defend. It was she who had opened the door for O'Callaghan and his party on their dramatic arrival. The girls' room at the back, and the front bedroom in which Joe Kane still lay, suffering from his wound, formed Alf Dillon's fighting front. Mary Kane had been detailed to load rifles, but

native scouts had been so consistently trying to gain admittance through the back window that, for half an hour before the reinforcements had diverted the aborigines' attention, her whole time had been occupied in loading for Alf, who was using three weapons. Although both had heard, with relief, the sound of the men returning, Alf and Mary Kane had remained faithfully at their posts. On hearing this from Mollie, O'Callaghan sent Svortzen and Allan Kane to relieve them. Mary Kane immediately went to her husband, while Alf joined the others in the dining-room.

## CHAPTER XVI

### WAR

ALL eyes were centred now on the three aborigines. Bru Bri stood in the middle of the room, his eyes flashing fires of anger, his arms folded across his brawny chest. Beyond a grunted acknowledgment of O'Callaghan's greeting, the chief had not spoken since his arrival. Behind him, his two companions—silent figures almost equalling their chief in physical proportions—leaned upon their bloody spears.

Confronting the chief, O'Callaghan shook him by the hand, addressing him in the Kamilaroi tongue.

'Bru Bri, my brother,' he said, 'speak to your warriors and bid them withdraw from the wars of the white man.'

The chief's eyes were smouldering.

'Piriwallan,' he said, 'the white man's wars are my wars, although I have not made them so. My tribe is a tribe no longer. The white man's fire-water has destroyed it. As you, in your wisdom, bade me, I returned to the Moonbis after I had spoken to you here. I went, my heart filled with sadness, to outlaw the Eagle-hawk from his tribe. But woe to the tribe of the Moonbis! I returned to the mountains too late. Biraban was there, and with him a white man, with an abundance of

fire-water. The white man spoke a few words of my language, and he made many signs. The tribe had all gathered around him. Many were laughing and singing, filled with the evil of his magic. Others listened eagerly to him, and read his signs. I hid myself in the grass by the camp-fires. He wanted my warriors to fight for him—to destroy the white tribe in the valley—and, as a reward, they would be supplied with fire-water for many summers to come. He had a brave chief who would see that this was done. I could bear it no longer. I rose from my hiding-place and drove my spear deep into his evil heart. The men of my tribe grew angry. The women and children fled, screaming, into the mountains.

“Bru, Bri,” cried the warriors, “in destroying this white man, you have killed the spirits of happiness.”

‘Until the sun reached the tops of the mountains I spoke to them, telling them of the great devastation wrought by this evil magic; telling them of the great traditions of their tribe. When I had finished, Biraban rose to speak against me—me, his brother. My heart was filled with anger.

“*Waita uwolla, Biraban,*” I shouted. “I, the chief of the Moonbis, disown you. Take your weapons, and your women, if you can find them, and leave the Moonbis for ever. Should I meet you again in my hunting-grounds, I will spear you to death.”

‘Biraban departed, and shouting: “The Eagle-hawk is our chief!” more than half of my warriors followed him.

‘I spoke to the others kindly. I spoke to them as a brother. But many of them were sullen, and I knew that I should lose them. I slept, and when I awoke, but twenty of my warriors remained to me.

“Men of the Moonbis,” I said to them, “the tribe of Piriwallan is faced with danger. Let us go out to the valley and defend his people from our evil brothers, and from the men of the White Tribe of the Gold Totem.”

‘All day long we have hidden in the long grass, and in the timber which fringes the watercourse. When Punnal went to his slumber, the evil black men came stealing down on your gunyah. In silence, we fought them; hiding, striking, killing.

Of my twenty faithful warriors, these two alone are left to me. The evil fighting men who are dead are much too many to count.'

O'Callaghan warmly thanked the chief and his two loyal adherents for what they had done. It was still quiet outside the homestead. Bru Bri thought that the surviving, rebellious natives had little stomach left to continue the fighting. He offered to make a survey of the surrounding bush, to see if he could discover their intentions. O'Callaghan told him of Biraban's death, but the chief made no comment. The squatter knew that, in his heart, Bru Bri was glad that the brother, whom he deeply loved, had died before completely accomplishing the will of the evil white man.

The chief dropped lightly from the southern window, ran swiftly across the clearing, and entered the sparse timber. Due to the exertions of poor Alex Wade, the bush here afforded but little protection to the enemy.

Within the homestead, Mary Kane and Mollie prepared a meal for the famished defenders. They had scarcely finished their repast when Bru Bri returned, and told them that the remnant of the native force had withdrawn to the Yellow Creek—Peel River junction, where their new leader, Bunkiye, was trying to induce them to renew the attack. Bru Bri had discovered that their supply of rum was exhausted.

'Until more evil fire-water is supplied by the white men,' he said, 'the spirits of fear, which have entered them because their bodies are weak from their drunkenness, will govern them. They laugh and jeer at Bunkiye, crying that evil spirits are stalking the bush which encircles your gunyah. They tell him the bunyips dive in the water-holes of the creek. They will not return here to-night.'

This was comforting news to the settlers. But there could be no feeling of security. By this time, Ruskin and his convicts must be somewhere in the locality, but Ruskin would have learned of the dreadful havoc wrought in the ranks of his black allies. Under these circumstances, it was most improbable that the convict would risk the uncertainty of a night battle in surroundings which were strange to him. There was even a

possibility that, should word of the co-operation of the inhabitants of the valley reach him, Ruskin might abandon his project altogether.

But O'Callaghan felt that he could not leave anything to chance. He sent Bru Bri, and his two warriors, to act as sentries on the confines of the clearing. Then he directed Mollie and Mary Kane, Abo, Alf Dillon and Svortzen, to retire so that they might be fresh to face the uncertainty of the morning. O'Callaghan himself, with the two Kane brothers and Bill Wade, had urgent work to do—to provide some form of protection for the saddle horses.

To O'Callaghan's mind, this was now a most essential factor in the defence of the homestead. For, if Ruskin should destroy the settlers' only means of transport, he would weaken their fighting strength, and ruin all chances of escape for them in the event of defeat. Stark necessity had made the men abandon their horses after the wild charge across the clearing, through the scattered ranks of the besieging blacks. To have placed the animals in the stock-yard then—on the hill on the southern side of the clearing—would have made them targets for the spears of the warriors. So the settlers had left the animals to their own resources.

The stock-yard was built of rough-hewn logs, set in morticed uprights. By digging out some of the posts and removing the cross logs, O'Callaghan and his three assistants were able to secure sufficient material to build a small, fortified enclosure. This was to be established on the western side of the house, with the wall of the building as one of its barricades.

Two adjoining sides were made first, the logs resting one upon the other, the tops of the walls rising about eight or nine feet from the ground. It was a difficult task in the darkness, and took time. When these walls were completed, the horses, which had not strayed beyond the confines of the clearing, were rounded into the three-sided enclosure, and hobbled. The construction of the remaining side completed the fortification.

The animals were now surrounded by an almost bullet-proof fence, and, being under the windows in the western wall of the homestead, they could be watched by the defenders.

It wanted but two hours for daylight. There was other work yet to be done, but O'Callaghan and his men were tired. Sending Bill Wade and the two Kane brothers to bed, the squatter paid a visit to Bru Bri, who slept at his post, as only an aboriginal sentry can, without neglecting his duty. The chief had nothing to report. Before retiring, O'Callaghan found an old auger, and awakening Abo, he instructed the stockman to bore loop-holes in each side of the house, and to bar up all windows, with the exception of the one overlooking the horses' fortification. Then he retired to snatch what rest he could, before the new day brought its troubles.

The squatter awoke with a start. He had been dreaming of Nance, but the beams of sunlight streaking through the chinks of the walls dispelled his illusions and brought him back to the bitter present. For a moment he rested on his improvised bed in the corner of the dining-room, then, with a sigh of resignation, he arose and went out into the clearing.

It was a beautiful morning—a glorious sunny morning, with Nature at her best. From above Mulla Mountain, the rising sun sent down its golden rays upon the dewy carpet of green and brown surrounding the homestead. Dewdrops, hanging from the tree foliage and resting lightly on tiny blades of couch grass, sparkled and danced in the brilliant light; while everywhere the birds, but lately arisen, sang their songs of sunshine.

O'Callaghan stood in the clearing, drinking in the dew-laden air blown by a gentle breeze from the tops of the Moonbis. He surveyed the landscape briefly. There were several dark objects scattered about the fringes of the clearing. In a few quick strides he reached them—the twisted bodies of native warriors, fallen before Alf Dillon's rifle and the terrible, avenging spears of their chieftain. Sadly the squatter studied them; faces that were familiar, men with whom he had eaten, hunted and slept. Truly, he thought, it was a cruel whim of fate which had brought Ruskin to the outskirts of the Golden Valley.

Standing there in silent meditation, O'Callaghan turned to find Bru Bri beside him. They did not speak, but each was aware of a mutual understanding. Reverently, they drew the bodies into the shelter of the timber, away from the sun, which



would soon be drying the dewdrops and scorching the soft grasses. There were other bodies scattered among the trees, but these must remain where they had fallen until men could be sent to bury them.

O'Callaghan and Bru Bri examined the whole of the previous night's fighting area, in search of wounded warriors, but not a living native remained. In accord with the custom in native warfare, the wounded had been taken away by the retreating blacks. Any who could not be found apparently had died during the night. Filled with the white man's rum, the blacks had not bothered to remove their dead. O'Callaghan went back to the house.

Seated around the big breakfast table, the settlers felt secure in their fortification. Despite the sadness in their hearts, there was some elation over the defeat of the blacks, and they were confident of a similar victory should Ruskin attack. But Bru Bri was silent, brooding over the fall of his tribe, and turning over in his warrior's mind plan after plan for the destruction of the evil tribe of the Gold Totem, and for the safety of his friends.

The blackfellow, as befitted a great chieftain, had eaten in the golden sunshine with his two sturdy warriors. But to please Piriwallan, he left his companions at their sentry posts, while he squatted on the floor of the homestead as his white friends ate their *karai*. He had no desire to listen to the general talk around him. He thought in silence, and evolved a plan which satisfied him. When Piriwallan had filled his stomach, and the white man's mind was peaceful and ready to listen, Bru Bri spoke.

'Piriwallan,' he said, 'when a hunter returns to his tribe with news that evil warriors are approaching, the men do not hide in their gunyahs; they go out to meet their enemies. The gins, the *inargungs* and the children remain by the camp-fire, while the warriors defend them from afar. The evil white men are approaching. Why do you not gather your warriors and go out and give them battle?'

'The black man's laws of battle cannot be adopted by white men,' O'Callaghan replied. 'The white man kills from a distance with his thunder-stick. The tribe with the smallest

number of warriors must seek a position where the little round stones from the thunder-sticks of its enemies cannot reach it. For that reason we remain in our gunyah, the walls of which will turn the little stones of our enemies.'

But Bru Bri's plan had been well conceived and he was not to be daunted.

'When the black tribes hide in their gunyahs,' he said, 'their enemies advance in the darkness with fire sticks, and burn the gunyahs to the ground.'

In planning the defence of the homestead this possibility had escaped O'Callaghan. The dry, bark-roofed house would burn like matchwood in the warm autumn air. But Bru Bri's proposal to attack the attackers with inferior numbers involved risks which he did not feel justified in taking. There was still the possibility that the defeat of the blacks might discourage Ruskin sufficiently to keep him from attacking until either he had reinforced his party or, with the aid of his devilish rum, had secured the assistance of another tribe of natives. In this event, help should arrive from Port Stephens before hostilities were reopened.

All this O'Callaghan explained to Bru Bri, but the wisest chief of all the warlike totems of the Kamilaroi shook his head.

'A wise chief does not place the fate of his tribe in the hands of a single warrior,' he said. 'The evil tribe may have captured your messenger before he reached the Big Water. By waiting, you strengthen the hearts and the weapons of their warriors. The men of your tribe are in their own hunting-grounds. The trees, and the rocks, and the valleys are your friends. The evil warriors are strangers, fighting in a strange land. Let the trees, and the rocks, and the valleys assist you. Go out into the bush-land, and give your enemies battle.'

There was something in the chief's argument. O'Callaghan decided to consult with Abo and Joe Kane. So, taking the big bushman with him, he entered the room where the wounded squatter still rested, and related what Bru Bri had told him.

'That's the first time I ever knowed a b—— blackfeller to talk common sense,' Abo observed. 'Didn't I tell you, Cal, we oughter get out after them convicted dingoes, an' blow all

their blarsted 'eads off? We should 'ave done it right from the start, instead o' wastin' time up in them there mountains.'

Joe Kane was a little more cautious, suggesting, if possible, some form of preliminary reconnaissance.

O'Callaghan went back to Bru Bri.

'Bru Bri,' he said, 'if we find that the men of Warrah still wish to attack us, we will fight them in the bush country. But first we must learn their intentions. Can you and your warriors help us?'

With a smile and a nod, the chief assented.

'*Uwanum bota bag*,' he said, as he took up his spears and his war boomerang—'I will go alone. My warriors will remain to watch, lest evil men come creeping through the timber.'

Bru Bri slipped across the clearing, and merged into the shadows of the scrub.

When the two convict scouts whom Ruskin had sent into the Wallabadahs as an advance party came across Svortzen and, later, O'Callaghan, they were completely surprised. The squatter's men had kept their activities so well concealed that no one at Warrah was aware that the settlers had established an outpost in the mountains. The two men, therefore, had either to destroy their discoverers, or to return to their leader with the news that the advance on the valley was no longer a secret. They were completely puzzled by the report of O'Callaghan's rifle and the death yell of Biraban. After their failure to shoot the two settlers, the convicts decided to make their way back to Ruskin for further instructions.

They came across their leader, working up the southern slopes of the mountains, at the head of his gang. When they told their story, Ruskin flew into a rage. He cursed them, and threatened them with all manner of terrible reprisals for their bungling. The younger of the two men summoned up sufficient courage to retaliate. Ruskin raised his rifle and shot the poor fellow dead.

'There, yer ——!' the leader shouted. 'Let that be a bleedin' lesson to ye, ye lot o' swine. Do yer duty by me, or the rest o' ye'll be served alike.'

The men were all callous, heartless brutes, especially selected from Ruskin's team of villains for the work in hand; and the foul deed had no apparent effect upon them. But the threat which followed the murder caused some murmurings and an occasional veiled grumble. Ruskin quickly appeased them.

'That means a bigger divvy for the rest o' ye, any'ow,' he growled, and grinned at the burst of applause which followed.

Ruskin halted his party, and rode a few paces away into the scrub with Johnson, a thick-set, black-bearded ruffian who acted as his second in command, and was completely in Ruskin's confidence. When the two had ensconced themselves in a position safe from the ears of the rest of the band, Ruskin explained his revised plans.

'It's neck or nuthin' now,' he said to his confederate. 'Them two bleedin' fools're to blame. I sent 'em up to see if the coast was clear, an' the bunglin' coots went an' showed 'emselves. The 'ole bleedin' valley knows what we're upter now. Shootin' was too good fer that messin' swine.'

'Well, it ain't no use grousin',' grumbled his companion. 'If them drunken darkies is doin' their job, we ain't gonner have much trouble. What d'yer reckon that shot was that Whale an' Carter 'eard?'

'Mightier been anythin'. More likely only bleedin' 'orrors. Tell yer wot I'm gonner do. I'm gonner leave you 'ere ter look arter this bleedin' crowd o' fools, an' I'm goin' up there ter do a bit o' scoutin' on me own account.'

Johnson agreed.

'No use runnin' our 'eads into a noose,' he said, as he turned to go back to his companions.

Ruskin moved slowly up the side of the mountain, fully aware that he was not a bushman, but trusting to his natural cunning and keen powers of observation. He picketed his horse in some bushes at the mouth of the pass and, eyes and ears alert, proceeded stealthily on foot.

On either side, the mountainous country furnished excellent cover for an ambush party. Great jutting crags, tumbled rocks and deep wooded gullies abounded. Ruskin began to wonder at his own temerity in venturing alone into this country of

natural fortresses. The shadowy edges of the pass, though harder to traverse, afforded some immunity from the aim of a rifleman, and of these the ex-convict availed himself.

In this rugged, mountainous country, he had little chance of discovering a hidden enemy unless he exposed himself. So, for a short distance, he ran rapidly along the open track, and then returned to the shadows and listened. There was nothing; except the natural sounds of the bush. He continued on. A curve in the pass brought him, around a jutting boulder of rock, on to a short stretch of level ground—the end of the pass, and the beginning of the sloping mountain country leading down into the Golden Valley. The faintly-moonlit landscape, with its silver-tipped apple forests and its dark and gloomy cloud shadows, awed him a little. The lonely wail of a solitary dingo, from somewhere down the slope, made further reconnaissance uninviting. Ruskin was about to turn and retrace his steps when the glistening, dew-covered body of Biraban caught his eye. With a muffled curse, he strode forward to examine it.

The bullet-hole in the brawny, naked breast told him everything. Ruskin knew now, why the settlers' ambush party had returned to the valley. Without further waste of time, he wheeled and ran south as fast as his bulky form would allow. He was afraid lest his dusky allies should be overcome before he could bring his men to their aid.

An hour later, at the head of his band of well-armed convicts, he rode through the pass, and entered the Golden Valley.

In the early hours of the morning, Ruskin called a halt on the banks of Yellow Creek, some five miles from the Wade homestead and, leaving a small guard in charge of the picketed horses, he took the remainder of his men forward on foot. A mile farther on, a dusky scout emerged from the shadows, spoke a few words in the Kamilaroi tongue, then disappeared whence he had come. Ruskin turned to Johnson.

'What was the black coot jabberin' about?' he asked, gruffly.

'He says 'arf his tribe is dead, an' the rest is hidin' down where

this creek runs inter the river. I don't know much o' their lingo, but that's what I make of it.'

'The hell he did. Well, we ain't gonner do no attackin' to-night. We'll go back to the 'orses; and camp till the bleedin' sun's shinin'.'

## CHAPTER XVII

### TACTICS

FLEET-FOOTED as the emu, Bru Bri ran between the tree trunks, the greatest man of all the great tribes of trackers, hunters and warriors. Swiftly he ran, the wind and the birds and the animals talking to him, whispering words of wisdom about his enemies. A wallaby, hiding beneath a scrub wattle in the early morning when he should have been feeding, spoke of the nearness of white men. Bru Bri stopped running and slipped lightly to the top of a tall, blue gum tree. He examined the landscape, then as lightly, he slid to the ground again. Changing his course, he ran eastward, towards the creek; where a number of chattering soldier-birds told tales of the men and horses beneath them. Bru Bri entered the creek and swam steadily against its muddy current, his head and his eyes appearing only occasionally above the surface of the water. For two or three hundred yards he swam, then, creeping beneath a clump of reeds, he placed his feet against the muddy bank and listened. Voices came to him—clear and distinct—the voices of evil white men. While the white men talked the black chief listened. Then he swam back to the place where he had entered the water and climbed to the top of another tree. He descended again, and ran swiftly back to the gunyah of his white friends. There, he told Piriwallan all that he had seen and heard.

O'Callaghan asked many questions. With face grave and obviously deeply concerned, he called the settlers together.

'Ruskin and a number of convicts are hiding on the creek about five miles south of us,' he said. 'From what Bru Bri has

said, there appear to be about twenty of them all told. Bunkiye, who is self-appointed chief of the remnants of the Moonbi tribe, is with them. They are planning to attack us shortly. About noon, the convicts will surround the homestead at a distance, and endeavour to pick some of us off by sniping at us from the bush. When night falls, they will close in on us, and the blacks will join them. They are fully aware of the strength of our position. The blacks have told them everything, and they will have ample time to study us before darkness sets in, and renders them just as safe as we are now.

'There are thirteen of us, all told, including two women, three natives, and one man badly wounded. And, furthermore, Bru Bri learned from Ruskin's own lips that we can expect no help from Port Stephens. Tim Riley was shot before he passed the Warrah basin, and my message taken from him, read and destroyed. So you see, my friends, that our position is desperate. We cannot rely on our defences here, with such a superior force besieging us. And, as Bru Bri says, there is always the danger of fire. Our only hope is to take the offensive immediately. We must attack before Ruskin does, and rely on our superior bushcraft to help us.'

The defenders of the homestead heard O'Callaghan in silence. Bru Bri stood, with arms folded, his fierce face smeared with war-paint, his heart smouldering with desire for vengeance. Joe Kane was there too, propped up in a chair, pale from the effects of his wound. The others sat around the table, silent, thoughtful. Outside, on the edge of the clearing, two dusky warriors kept a vigilant watch for the foe, whether white or black, while the white warriors of the valley held their war council.

O'Callaghan was speaking again.

'Bru Bri found tracks showing that the convicts intended to attack us last night. They came in a mass, but a mile this side of their present camp, they turned back, apparently when they heard of the defeat of the blacks. They were following the old Port Stephens track. They will probably come that way again to-day. My plan is to attack them before they break camp and destroy as many of them as possible. Then

the attacking party, which will be small, will retreat along the Port Stephens track towards the homestead, and lead the remnants into an ambush. Has anyone any other ideas?'

The others agreed with the proposal, and details of the campaign were worked out. Two men were to remain in the homestead, with the two women and Joe Kane, to protect them from a possible attack by the blacks, and to guard the horses, which were not required by the skirmishing party. This task was allocated to Alf Dillon and Bill Wade. Four horses were to be taken for the use of the ambush party. The initial attack on the convicts' camp was to be made on foot, by O'Callaghan, Bru Bri and the two loyal natives. O'Callaghan, then, would endeavour to lead the convicts into the waiting trap. John and Allan Kane, Abo and Carl Svortzen, were to compose the ambush party.

While Bru Bri and his men moved silently into the bush to the south of the homestead, four sturdy horses were taken from the fortified stock-yard and saddled. When the yard had been strengthened again, the party mounted; O'Callaghan seating himself on Charcoal, behind John Kane's saddle. They rode off in the wake of the three aborigines.

About three and a half miles from the homestead, the Port Stephens track deviated a little from the creek to avoid a rocky, box-covered hillock, and wended its way through a depression between this obstruction and a somewhat similar, but larger, hill to the west. Here, O'Callaghan placed his men, two on either side of the depression. The rocks and timber rendered the settlers invisible to anyone passing through the valley beneath them, yet the hillocks were so close together that even a racing target would be an easy one to the men on their summits.

The ambushers were to reserve their fire until the convicts, galloping through the narrow defile in pursuit of their elusive foe, should reach a point where a miss would be impossible. Then, at a signal from Abo, the men were to fire simultaneously at the horses of the leading convicts; and in the resulting confusion, the settlers should have time to reload. Then, aided by Bru Bri and his warriors from the rear, and O'Callaghan return-



ing to attack the van, the settlers should so reduce the strength of Ruskin's party that he would be forced to surrender. It was a bold plan—a rash plan—but considering the desperate circumstances in which the settlers were placed, it was a plan worthy of its fearless originator.

After satisfying himself that his men had grasped every detail, O'Callaghan took his rifle, powder bag and bullet pouch, and moved southwards down the track. For a mile he travelled in a leisurely manner, then slipped quickly into the timber on his right. A twisted branch, overhanging the track, indicated that Bru Bri had located the enemy not far from here. Every caution must now be exercised.

At this point, the track hugged the bank of the creek, the country to the west rising in low and timbered hills, away from the stream. O'Callaghan quickly availed himself of this excellent cover. He did not know the exact location of the enemy, so he discarded his rifle, and climbed a big box tree. A wisp of blue smoke, curling above the tree tops, told where Ruskin was encamped. O'Callaghan was surprised at the fellow's audacity in lighting a fire so close to the homestead. The squatter made a mental note of three prominent trees forming the points of a triangle, with the convicts' camp as the centre. Then he descended to the ground, and ran, in a straight line, until he reached the tree on the extreme west of the triangle. Looking east from this position, smoke could be seen plainly rising from the opposite side of a thicket of scrub wattle, in a line with the central point between the other two trees. Running bent double, his head and shoulders almost touching the ground, O'Callaghan reached this thicket, and wormed his way, under its shelter, towards the other side. His face darkened by the shadows, he parted the branches gently, and studied the scene before him.

A sparsely-timbered slope stretched down to the creek bank, where some fifteen of the convicts, with their leader, lounged about, chatting and smoking, their coarse jokes and ribald laughter plainly reaching the squatter's ears. A short distance up the stream, another five men were saddling horses. The animals had apparently eaten their fill of the long, green stalks

of kangaroo grass. Between the main body of men and the watcher a number of rifles lay in a disorderly heap. After a casual glance at the men, these weapons took all of the squatter's attention. If they could be captured or destroyed, the whole band of marauders would be at his mercy.

Calculating rapidly, O'Callaghan studied the position. Two hundred yards of open country lay between him and the fire-arms. The convicts were reclining fifty yards farther on. By means of a sudden dash, he might gain another fifty at the outside, before the convicts realized his intention; but this would not be sufficient lead to outrun them. Even now, the convicts were moving about restlessly, as though considering making ready for departure. But the horses were not yet saddled. The squatter decided that he could allow himself another ten minutes, at the most. He was considering crawling, snake-like, through the long grass towards the weapons, when the laugh of a kookaburra rang out from across the creek. As the last note died away, O'Callaghan closed the wattle screen before him and answered, conveying to Bru Bri and his warriors, in the rise and fall of his voice, a message which said:

'Take up your positions immediately, and be ready to attack, but do nothing further until I call.'

Rapidly, O'Callaghan examined the priming of his rifle, threw himself flat in his shelter, and crawled through the bush screen into the long grass beyond. For a hundred yards he travelled down the slope, in aboriginal fashion, watching the convicts carefully, wriggling forward a little when all eyes seemed to be averted, lying motionless as a fallen log whenever one of the convicts turned in his direction. Here he met an obstacle which had to be skirted. A patch of grassless rocky ground, some five or six yards in width, stretched at right angles across his path, and to cross it openly would be inviting disaster. To follow the grass around it would entail adding more to his tedious journey, and time was pressing. In a moment of indecision the voice of one of the convicts reached him.

'There's a goanna or somethin' up there in the grass on the side o' the slope. I seed the grass shakin' just now.'

O'Callaghan flattened himself hard against the earth, but another voice reassured him.

'We ain't worrying about no goannas, Bill.'

Then suddenly, something happened which gave the squatter his chance. A great chestnut stallion, evidently objecting to the pinching of a saddle girth which a convict was endeavouring to tighten, reared on its hind legs and struck viciously at its torturer; at the same time emitting a squeal of rage and pain. For a brief instant, all eyes were turned upon the animal. O'Callaghan raced across the rocks on hands and knees, and gained the cover of the grass on the other side, where he lay still for a brief moment to observe the effect of his action. In the excitement of the moment he had not been seen. The refractory stallion stood passive now, but restless. The convict moaned as he nursed his bruised shoulder. O'Callaghan, not a hundred yards now from his objective, wormed his way forward once more.

Ninety yards to go—eighty-five—eighty. The squatter saw his plan succeeding when—Bang!—a rifle shot rang out from the direction of the homestead. A shot, followed by a faint, high-pitched scream of agony. Instantly, the marauders were up—some running towards their horses, others for their weapons. O'Callaghan leaped to his feet, emitting the kookaburra laugh as he raised and levelled his rifle at the foremost of the astonished convicts.

The effect upon the ruffians was instantaneous. As though a ghost had arisen from the bowels of the earth before him, each and every man stood petrified. The squatter's hopes of success had been shattered by the sound of the rifle shot, but now the inaction of the convicts revived them. For a brief instant, his eyes roved along the grassy creek bank. Three black arms, holding spears, swept up from the undergrowth, and three convicts stood on the brink of eternity.

'Yanoa—stop!' O'Callaghan shouted.

The arms disappeared, the grass closed over them, and the squatter stood facing his enemies.

Ruskin, erect in the centre of his defenceless men, turned to follow O'Callaghan's gaze, but a peaceful landscape was all that

he saw. He turned again to face the squatter, and as he did so, O'Callaghan spoke.

'You had better surrender, Ruskin. You're surrounded by blacks. At a word from me you'll all be speared to death. Put up your hands—all of you—and don't move.'

The convicts obeyed with alacrity. Hands flew rapidly upward, and furtive eyes sought the tree trunks and boulders, apprehensive of what lay beyond. Ruskin, edging towards the rifles and muskets, stopped and raised his hands above his head. But O'Callaghan was not deceived. He knew the big scoundrel too well—knew that behind the grimy, hair-matted forehead was a brain capable of conceiving every possible device of cunning.

'Ruskin,' the squatter shouted, 'turn to your left. Walk slowly, until I tell you to stop. The rest of you, remain where you are.'

Ruskin turned without a word and began to walk, ever so slowly, under the menace of the squatter's steady rifle. The convict's mind was working rapidly. He knew that O'Callaghan had natives with him, but he knew also that their numbers were few. If he could only induce the squatter to empty his rifle, the men would have their weapons before he had time to reload. The situation required swift action. O'Callaghan, still covering the ex-convict, moved cautiously towards the pile of weapons.

Ruskin's horse pistols hung in their holsters on his saddle. A little farther on, in the direction in which he was moving, his horse stood saddled, ready for the advance upon the homestead. Ruskin took a chance. With a shrill whistle, he threw himself flat behind an outcrop of rock, expecting at any moment to feel a stringy-bark spear tear through the flesh and bone of his back.

O'Callaghan saw the horse, with the pistols hanging from its saddle, move to obey its master's call. Simultaneously, the convicts began to run, in a mass, towards their weapons. The squatter levelled his rifle, calling upon them to stop, but before his command could be obeyed, two of their number lay dead, pierced by native spears. Ruskin's horse plunged madly, a spear embedded in its groin.

With what they believed to be a horde of armed blacks in their rear, and only one man with a rifle preventing them from securing their own weapons, the convicts charged up the slope. O'Callaghan saw that he had no chance of reaching the weapons before them. He reserved his fire, and turning, ran swiftly for the shelter of the timber to the north. Three or four rifles cracked behind him as he dived into the tangle of trees and undergrowth, but no one pursued him. The ambush plan appeared doomed to failure. In bitter chagrin, the squatter wormed his way eastward, towards the creek. Here, in a clump of water reeds, Bru Bri and his men met him, and the four held a hurried consultation.

The chief explained how, on hearing the sounds of the shot and the scream from the direction of the homestead, he had sent one of his warriors to investigate. It appeared that Bunkiye, who had returned to his camp on the Peel, had despatched a runner with a message to Ruskin, and the fellow had encountered the ambush party on his way. The blackfellow's keen eyes had discovered tracks, which he had followed; with the result that he had met Abo, face to face, in the rocks on the top of the hill. To prevent him from warning Ruskin of the trap which had been set, the bushman shot the blackfellow as soon as he appeared.

O'Callaghan and the two warriors lay hidden, while Bru Bri slipped away to reconnoitre. The chief returned with information that the convicts, with Ruskin in the lead, were moving slowly down the track, a foot scout in the timber on either side of the main body, and another, a hundred yards or so in the van. Ruskin was taking no chances. It was quite clear now that the ambush would have to be abandoned. O'Callaghan told Bru Bri and his warriors to follow the convicts. The squatter crossed the creek, ran rapidly north along its eastern bank until he reached a position opposite the ambush party, recrossed, and joined Abo and his men, well ahead of the convicts.

The big bushman had further distressing information to impart. Shortly after the shooting of the blackfellow, another had appeared, but had vanished into the timber before a shot could be fired. Abo believed that the native had returned northward, towards the camp of Bunkiye. If this were the

case, the blacks, when they found that at least four of the white men were away from the homestead, might seize the opportunity of attacking the house in its weakened state. So O'Callaghan sent Svortzen and Allan Kane back to reinforce the defenders there; the Swede, mounted behind Allan, leaving his own horse for O'Callaghan.

With two settlers and three blacks now comprising his little force, O'Callaghan decided upon harassing tactics, and a slow retreat upon the homestead. Leaving John and Abo on the hill-tops with instructions to fire from cover at the enemy on sight, he mounted and rode southward, keeping well to the west of the regular track, and pausing every two or three hundred yards, to listen. Eventually, he heard the slow beat of hoofs on the hard ground. The leaves overhead rustled in a light southerly breeze. The squatter concluded that the convicts were still a little to the south of him, so he pressed his way through the timber to a position on slightly rising ground a hundred paces west of the track. Here he dismounted, picketed his horse in a thick tangle of gum bushes and, rifle in hand, secreted himself behind a rock and waited.

He intended to kill Ruskin, and so to demoralize the convicts. But first, he would have to account for the scout patrolling the western flank of the party.

The squatter was not kept in suspense for long. A wary scout passed by along the track beneath him, followed, at a short distance, by the main body of convicts, with Ruskin still in the lead. They were well out of range of O'Callaghan's rifle, but gradually drawing closer to him. The squatter lowered his weapon, and concentrated his attention on the bush, directly south of his position. A rustling sound of parting grass reached him on the southerly breeze. He discarded his rifle and, pressing himself hard against the earth, wriggled a few yards to the west. The rustling grew louder. He could hear the sound of stealthy footsteps. Warily, O'Callaghan drew the foliage of a little bush down over his head and shoulders, trusting to the long kangaroo grass to hide the rest of his body.

The scout was almost on him. The squatter held his breath. A pair of leather-clad legs passed by within a foot of him.

Silently, the squatter raised himself to a crouching position. He strangled the convict, but could not completely stifle the fellow's yell, and the others opened fire. The range was still great, but bullets were coming dangerously close. O'Callaghan grasped the dead convict's rifle, and, running down the slope, whipped it to his shoulder. But Ruskin was no longer visible. He had taken shelter behind his horse, and his followers were doing likewise. O'Callaghan shot one of them. Then, discarding the empty rifle and miraculously escaping a hail of lead, he ran back to his own weapon, in the rocky shelter which he had formerly occupied.

Although the breastwork of rock before him protected him from the fire of the enemy, the squatter realized that, in a few more minutes, his position would become untenable. A number of convicts were moving away from their companions to take him on either flank, while others covered his hiding-place. Ruskin remained hidden behind the huge bulk of his horse.

O'Callaghan dared not fire. He knew that immediately he emptied his rifle, the convicts would have him in their power. He could inflict no further damage on them. His course now was to escape if possible. To do this, he must reach his horse undetected, and gallop away before his enemies should have time to surround him. He was about to move from his position, when he heard the Kamilaroi war-cry, and he saw Johnson, Ruskin's lieutenant, bound into the air and fall prone, his body pierced by the spears of Bru Bri's warriors. The convicts changed their positions to face the new threat, some of them firing as they did so. A native death shriek followed the shots. O'Callaghan took quick aim and fired at Ruskin, as the leader of the convicts raced for better cover. The squatter cursed, involuntarily, as the flying target avoided the bullet. Then, taking advantage of the diversion created by the blacks, he gained his horse, and was soon out of range.

When he reached the hillocks he found John Kane and Abo waiting for him, anxiously.

'Abo,' the squatter shouted. 'Picket your horse and come with me. They're got Bru Bri's party in trouble a mile up the

creek. They've killed one of the warriors at least. Hurry. There's no time to waste.'

John decided to go with them. O'Callaghan tied his own horse with those of his two men and together, the three ran southward. The convicts were nowhere to be seen when the settlers arrived near the scene of the conflict, but their horses were still there, tied to trees on the bank of the creek. Evidently, Ruskin had devised some new scheme. With a whispered word of caution to the others, the squatter climbed a tall gum and examined the country around him.

Below, on the creek bank, lay the bodies of Johnson and another convict. On the other side of the stream were two dark masses, almost hidden by grass, which O'Callaghan knew to be the prostrate forms of aborigines. Whether they were alive or dead, it was not possible to discover from that distance. Throwing back his head, he sent the kookaburra laugh rolling on the evening breeze. But no answer, either by voice or movement, came from the two still forms. The squatter was alarmed for Bru Bri's safety. Again, in wavering crescendo, he sent the peculiar cry of the royal Australian bush bird echoing across the country. This time an answer came, but rendered faint and indistinct by extreme distance. O'Callaghan could not determine whether the sound had been made by man or bird. He tried again, after an interval. This time, the reply was more definite. Bru Bri was coming at a rapid run from somewhere far to the north. O'Callaghan's eye fell once more on the convict's horses. Swiftly he descended the tree.

'I'm going to cut those horses free,' he whispered, on reaching his companions. 'I think they've killed Bru Bri's two warriors. But if we can stampede their horses in this scrub country, it'll give them something to worry about. Keep your eyes open, though. There may be a guard hidden somewhere handy.'

The squatter doubled back along the track and entered the creek. Wading or swimming as occasion demanded, he reached a position level with the horses, and raised himself cautiously to the rim of the bank. The animals were picketed close together. A few quick slashes with a sheath knife and three of them were



free. The third animal, ignoring the squatter's soothing whispers, snorted and stamped immediately its rein was severed. The squatter glanced rapidly around him, saw the gleam of a rifle barrel resting across the rock which had sheltered him earlier in the day and promptly threw himself flat upon his face. A rifle roared. The bullet whined harmlessly overhead. The squatter poised an instant on his hands and knees, then dived over the bank into the creek, striking the water in one of those peculiar blue holes which are common to all of the Golden Valley streams. He went deep down, and swam under water with the current for a short distance. When he reached the surface he heard a shot, followed by the thud of a falling body on the bank above him. A short interval of silence followed, then a fusillade of three reports in rapid succession. Apparently, more than one convict had been left in charge of the horses, and Abo and John Kane were now in conflict with the guard.

O'Callaghan made his way rapidly downstream to the spot where he had left his rifle. Then he emerged from the water, reclaimed his weapon, and ran to join his companions. At first, he thought he had mistaken the place for it seemed to be deserted. Then he cried out aloud in his sorrow. In a clump of bushes lay the body of Abo, his huge moustache clotted with blood, a bullet-hole in his chest. O'Callaghan raised him tenderly, looking for signs of life, but there were none. The big, fearless boundary rider had gone to another holding—a Station where there were no cattle to stray, and where feuds and battles were unknown. It was just another tragedy of the bush—another example of the noble deeds of self-sacrifice upon which our nation has been built. Deeds of the pioneers, which were to inspire their descendants with the valour displayed on the slopes of Gallipoli, the battlefields of France, and in the jungles of New Guinea.

A shot was fired as O'Callaghan stood, with bowed head, over the body of his faithful friend. The squatter dived for cover, throwing himself face downward behind some boulders. There was a soft rustle in the grass. O'Callaghan turned his head to find Bru Bri lying beside him. The chief, his big hand

resting upon the shoulder of his white friend, spoke in a low, rapid whisper.

'Piriwallan,' he said, 'the evil men of Warrah have killed my two warriors. The white men left their horses, with five of their warriors to guard them. Their chief, and some of his men, went away on foot. Hiding in the grass and the timber, I followed them. Their chief, and some of his warriors, have gone to the camp of Bunkiye. Others are surrounding the gunyah. Bunkiye is camped at Nemingha—the place where the waters meet. Many of his warriors roam in the bush around the gunyah of the white *inargung*. Piriwallan, we must go back there at once.'

O'Callaghan had expected as much, when he noticed the absence of the convicts. They must have crossed the creek while the squatter was with John Kane and Abo, and so had evaded detection by all save Bru Bri. But where was John Kane? The squatter could not leave the locality without first ascertaining whether the young settler were alive or dead.

Quickly he told Bru Bri all that had happened. The chief nodded his dusky head in understanding.

'I will find him, Piriwallan,' he said simply, as he slipped away through the grass.

O'Callaghan waited, listening only to the murmur of the stream, the carolling of the magpies, and the whispering of the evening breeze in the tree tops. With startling suddenness a shriek split the air—a long-drawn, dying scream—followed by two rifle shots. Then there was complete silence.

O'Callaghan remained motionless. So far as he could determine, the sounds had come from the south-west. The silence now seemed more profound than ever. Even the songs of the birds had ceased. For some minutes the squatter waited, his ears ringing with the echoes of that agonized cry. Then a kookaburra called from the direct north. O'Callaghan answered. The call came again, and again the squatter answered. He made his way cautiously in the direction of the sound.

A quarter of a mile to the north, he met Bru Bri and John

Kane. John was bleeding slightly from a bullet scar across the forehead. As the three hurried north towards the horses, John related what had happened.

'When you jumped into the creek, Cal,' he said, 'the convict that fired at you ran down to finish his job. Abo, thinking there was only one of 'em, jumped up out of the grass and shot him. As soon as he pulled the trigger, two more shots came from different points and Abo fell. I saw one convict hidin' behind a tree, and he saw me and fired, but missed. Poor Abo was killed on the spot. I changed my position, seeing that I couldn't do anything for him. I doubled about in the timber, till I spotted a hollow tree and climbed inside. One of the convicts saw me. He kept his rifle trained on the opening, so that I couldn't get out; but while I had my own gun, I knew that they wouldn't come too close. I reckoned I'd have to wait until dark. Then the cove who was watching me suddenly gave a yell and jumped into the air; and the next thing, there's Bru Bri standing beside him, waving to me to run. There were more of 'em about, but before they got over their fright, I was out of range. One of 'em winged me across the head, but it's only a scratch.'

## CHAPTER XVIII

### MULLA MOUNTAIN

WHEN the party reached the horses the sun had gone, and night was rapidly darkening the valley. Abo's mount was tied to O'Callaghan's saddle. With Bru Bri running by his side, and John bringing up the rear, the squatter led the way back to the homestead. For the first mile Bru Bri was silent, then he began to speak.

'Piriwallan,' he said, 'you cannot conquer the evil men of Warrah. They have won the hearts of the Moonbi warriors once again. Your mightiest warrior, he with the hair on his face and the fiery eyes, is dead. To save the white *inargung* you

must give up your hunting-grounds to the evil men of Warrah.'

O'Callaghan was pained to hear this talk of defeat.

'Why, Bru Bri,' he said, 'they haven't beaten us yet. Once we get inside the homestead we can keep them off. They've lost a number of their warriors already.'

'Piriwallan, to-night the moon is dead. The clouds are creeping over to hide the stars. It will be easy for the Moonbi men to destroy your gunyah with fire. The darkness will befriend them.'

'Piriwallan, in the heart of Mulla Mountain is a deep and mighty gorge. For generations, my tribesmen have sought refuge there when badly pressed by their enemies. One white warrior, with a thunder-stick, could hold it against all the evil men of Warrah. I, Bru Bri, can lead you there by paths unknown to the white men, or even Bunkiye's evil warriors. Let me go to your gunyah. Let me bring your people, and your horses, through the hostile tribes surrounding them. Together we will go to Mulla Mountain, and there the white *inargung* will be safe.'

O'Callaghan saw the wisdom of the chieftain's words. The burning of the homestead was the greatest danger, and Bru Bri, who had trained the Moonbi warriors, would know better than any, whether or not Bunkiye would resort to fire. Mollie Wade and Mary Kane must be kept as far away from the horrors of that as possible.

'Bru Bri,' he said, after a few minutes' deliberation, 'your plan is good. But for you to try to get my people away from the gunyah unaided, would be taking a grave risk of failure. We three will enter the gunyah, leaving our horses hidden in the bush. Then we will devise a means of getting safely away.'

Bru Bri grunted his approval. The impenetrable darkness now enveloping the bushland was welcomed by the men for the excellent cover which it afforded; but it served to retard their progress. Nearing the homestead, they hid their horses and proceeded warily on foot.

The house appeared to be immune, so far, from attack. Silent in movement, the three men filed through the trees and walked out into the clearing. To all outward appearances, the

cordon surrounding the building was a myth. But O'Callaghan knew that, in the timber from which they had just emerged, enemies lurked in abundance. He knew, too, that black ears had heard the muffled sounds of the men passing. He knew that black eyes had pierced the darkness—had recognized the black and white chieftains and, being so close to them, were afraid to give battle.

The squatter tapped lightly on the front door of the house, at the same time whispering his name. Gently the door opened, revealing nothing but a darker cavity in the black wall. Quietly, the three men passed inside, closing the door behind them.

Mollie Wade and Mary Kane had not been idle. Anxiously awaiting the return of the skirmishing party, they had prepared hot coffee and food. While the wearied men refreshed themselves, they discussed Bru Bri's plan.

It was decided that the enemy forces should be drawn to the northern side of the house while Bru Bri, with the two women and Joe Kane, who was now sufficiently recovered to ride, and Alf Dillon to serve as an escort, should slip out through the window on the southern side. In the confusion of battle, they should be able to reach the three horses picketed in the bush, without being seen by the enemy. It would be a simple matter then, under Bru Bri's guidance, to gain the mountains; and the others would follow, after giving them sufficient lead to ensure their safety.

The squatter commenced putting the scheme into action. To ensure success, he sent Bru Bri out to discover the exact location of the enemy forces whilst he himself set about preparing a means to attract their attention. Under cover of the darkness, he secured a long pole from the wood pile at the back of the house. To one end of this he attached a lantern, fixing it firmly, and shading it on one side with a piece of dark cloth. Then he examined the priming of his rifle and loosened his belt knife in its sheath. Both men and women were then instructed as to the parts which they were to play. A stout crutch was improvised for the support of Joe Kane's injured leg. Two rifles, a bag of powder and bullets, and another bag containing provisions and valuables, were strapped to Alf Dillon's shoulders.

Then the Moonbi chief returned, entering silently through the southern window of the dining-room.

Bru Bri's report was encouraging. He had discovered Bunkiye's men gathered in a small, natural clearing to the east of Yellow Creek. It seemed that, against Ruskin's wishes, they had departed there to refresh themselves and to renew their war-paint. Ruskin's own men were distributed at various points in the timber surrounding the building.

Carefully shading the open window, O'Callaghan lit his lantern, then, in a low whisper, gave his orders.

'John,' he said, 'you follow me through the door, but keep well out of the lantern light. As soon as Ruskin's men see the glow, they'll open fire. I hope they don't shoot too wide. Fire back at the first rifle flash, then change your position. You come a few yards behind John, Carl; and empty your rifle at the second flash. Bill, you and Allan remain in the house. Bar the door after we leave, and be ready to open it on our return.'

The squatter turned now to the chieftain, changing into the Kamilaroi tongue to hide from the others the emotion in his voice.

'Bru Bri, my friend,' he said, 'the good Baiame will repay you for this. I cannot. Save the white *inargung* and the white lady, and your spirit will enjoy good magic till the winds have worn the Moonbis to the level of the plains. When the warrigal howls from the south with a break in the length of his wail, you will know that all is well—that the evil white men have been drawn away from their watch on the gunyah. Lead my people then, to the horses at the place of which I have spoken. Good-bye.'

Warmly, the chieftain grasped the extended hand of his friend.

'*Tirag bag katan, Piriwallan,*' he whispered. 'I understand; I am ready.'

O'Callaghan then edged out through the doorway, the long stick across his left shoulder, the lighted lantern swinging far out behind him:

The squatter ran swiftly towards the trees fringing the northern side of the clearing. A shaft of flame stabbed through the

darkness on the creek bank, and the roar of a rifle shattered the silence. Then another shot rang out behind him, followed by a faint curse from the convict hiding by the creek. There was a third report, this time from the west, the bullet striking the pole on which the lantern was suspended, and ricochetting, whining, across the clearing. A brief silence followed—a silence of which O'Callaghan quickly availed himself.

'This way, men,' he shouted, his words carrying far on the still night air. 'Help the women along, one of you. We'll reach the horses before the scoundrels can stop us.'

The squatter's words had the desired effect. From the southern side of the house the deep, stentorian voice of Ruskin could be heard giving orders.

'Brown, Smithy—you, Tom. Round that other side an' quick abart it. Hurry, blarst yer. If one of 'em gets through, I'll scalp the whole bleedin' lot o' yer.'

O'Callaghan smiled grimly. For once he had outwitted the cunning rascal. Quickly he extinguished the lantern.

'Make plenty of noise, lads,' he whispered. 'But don't take any unnecessary risks. I'm going to see if the coast is clear for Bru Bri.'

The squatter wheeled and ran noiselessly past the house, entering the timber to the south at the spot from which, he estimated, Ruskin's voice had come. With great care, he searched the sparse scrub. Shouts, curses and rifle shots sounded intermittently from the north. Above the general din, O'Callaghan heard Ruskin's voice, loudly cursing his followers.

The squatter turned his face to the sky. The mournful howl of a dingo rose above the tree tops. Then he saw shadowy forms racing across the clearing. O'Callaghan retraced his steps, his objective now being to extricate his men from the difficult position in which the sham retreat had placed them. A few minutes more was all that Bru Bri required, to lead his charges through the danger zone. Even if it cost him his life, and the sacrifice of the lives of two of his men, the squatter decided that the chief should have those minutes.

O'Callaghan reached the edge of the clearing and stood, listening. From the timber came the sounds of crashing twigs

and pounding footsteps. There was an occasional curse as a convict, running blind in the darkness, crashed against a tree trunk, or tumbled over a fallen log. The rifle firing had ceased. The squatter concluded that John and Svortzen, realizing that their mission had been accomplished, had hidden themselves from the enemy, and that a search was being made for them.

Directly over Mulla Mountain, a faint glow of silvery light tinged the rolling cloud banks. Trees and mountains began to assume grotesque, fantastic shapes. The late moon was rising, and soon its diffused rays would illuminate the Golden Valley. This radiance could prove fatal to O'Callaghan and the two settlers, should it shine upon them during their return to the homestead.

The squatter was about to enter the timber when a figure emerged from the darkness.

'Where's Svortzen, John?' he asked in a whisper. 'He'd better hurry if he wants to get back alive. Look at that confounded moon.'

'She's coming up, Cal,' John whispered, raising his eyes to the eastern horizon, his voice tinged with sadness. 'She's coming up, but she can't harm poor old Carl. They got him with a stray bullet—through the head. He was dead when I grabbed him.'

O'Callaghan turned towards the homestead.

'Let's get back,' he said abruptly. 'Our people are well mounted, and on their way to safety by this.'

John was relieved. Bending double, the two raced across the clearing and entered the house unmolested.

Allan Kane and Bill Wade passed no comment on the death of Carl Svortzen, but their silence expressed their sorrow and apprehension. Alex Wade, Nance, Abo and now the faithful little Swede. Who would be the next? Quietly, they assisted O'Callaghan to pack up necessities for their flight; while John Kane kept watch at the various loopholes in the walls. Everything essential for a long stay in the mountains was to be taken. There was something strange about Bill Wade. He was unusually quiet and listless in carrying out his task. As the young



man stooped beside him, to help tie up a blanket, O'Callaghan spoke to him softly.

'Bill,' he whispered, 'we've had a rough time of it, but we'll soon be safe. Cheer up, lad.'

'I'm not going,' came the defiant reply. 'Only a cur 'ud leave the home that his dead father built for blacks an' convicts to pull to pieces. I'm not going.'

Gently, O'Callaghan passed an arm around his shoulders.

'Steady, boy,' he said. 'Do you think the old place has no hold over me? The place where Nance was reared—which she loved and treasured as her home. Bill, old chap, could I leave all this if I thought I could save it?'

'I'm sorry, Cal,' came the quiet rejoinder. 'But why not stop here and fight? At least we've got a chance.'

'That's where you're mistaken, Bill. If we fight—from here—the homestead will be burnt to the ground before morning. By abandoning it we might, at least, save it from fire. Once safely hidden in Mulla Mountain, we'll get word to the coast in time, and then we'll have the old place back again. Do you see my point?'

Bill nodded. He was about to speak when an interruption came from John.

'Cal,' he called. 'Here, quick. I think the blacks are coming.'

In an instant, O'Callaghan was beside him, his eye pressed to the loophole. Outside, in the faint light of the shaded moon, vague forms could be seen moving along the edges of the clearing. For the squatter one glance was sufficient.

'Hand me my rifle, John,' he cried. 'I'll show them that Piriwallan is still chief here. Take Allan out with you, and saddle four horses. Then pull the rails down and let the others go. I'll join you presently. Bill, you carry on with the packs. Make four bundles if you can. We'll strap one behind each saddle.'

Gently pushing the long barrel of his weapon through the loophole, the squatter paused until the veil of cloud lifted a little from the surface of the moon, then took rapid aim and fired. A cry of pain followed the roar of the rifle, and instantaneously,

one side of the clearing became devoid of natives. O'Callaghan raced to the western side of the house—to the window overlooking the fortified stock-yard. He could see John and Allan moving about in the enclosure among the horses, but a swift glance across the clearing disclosed nothing. Gently forcing the window shutter to obtain sufficient clearance, he handed down the four packs, one at a time, as Bill completed them. When John announced that the horses were in readiness, O'Callaghan obtained an axe from the back room, and passed it down after the packs.

'Now, lads,' he whispered, 'knock those rails out quick and lively and we'll—— Hell! They've fired the grass. We can't waste any time now.'

On the western side of the clearing, a tongue of flame shot up through the long, dry kangaroo grass, illuminating the tree trunks and casting shivering, ghostly shadows across the open spaces. It would be merely a matter of moments before the flames would be sweeping towards the homestead, before the south-westerly breeze.

A little to the north, a pin-point of light appeared, and to the south, another. Calling to Bill, O'Callaghan threw the back door open, and raced around to the little stock-yard, one wall of which was already almost demolished. The men mounted quickly. With the squatter leading, John directly behind, and Allan and Bill following, they charged northward. Behind them, crackling flames and rolling smoke clouds swept down upon the deserted house. Before them lay the gloomy bush-land, sheltering the cordon of the enemy, with the dark, foreboding mountains, and safety, beyond.

'Lie close to your horses' necks, men,' O'Callaghan shouted above the roar of thundering hoofs. 'Follow close behind me, I'm picking the track.'

On they galloped without interference. On through the darkness of the wild bush country where the moonbeams had no access. On, with faces grim set, over rocks and logs, for fifteen breathless minutes this headlong pace continued. Then the squatter reined in his horse, and the others drew up beside him.

'Thank Heaven that's over,' O'Callaghan gasped. 'We can take our time now, and not risk our necks further. If we approach the Mulla from the southern side, I feel quite confident that I'll be able to find Bru Bri's gorge in daylight. Roughly, it's about twenty miles from here, and we have just on three hours before dawn. We'll ride along slowly, so that we'll have light over the rougher stages of the journey. Strange that Ruskin's men offered no resistance to our escape.'

'I think it was too sudden for 'em, Cal,' said John. 'There's none of that gang could ride like that through rough scrub at night. I thought the blacks would have had something to say about it, though.'

'Too busy with their blasted fires,' Bill Wade observed.

The men were now riding due east, their horses jogging along at little more than a walk, making conversation easy. The three younger men conversed among themselves; but O'Callaghan remained quiet, as though constantly listening. After an hour's riding, he turned to his companions.

'Boys,' he said, 'don't be so noisy. I'm not sure, but several times I've fancied I heard sounds and signals. It's quite possible that the blacks are following us.'

Conversation dropped into low tones, then ceased altogether. The clouds had cleared a little, but the men were riding along the banks of the River Peel, where great red and blue gums completely shaded the light of the moon, their huge, close-set boles making riding a hard task in the darkness. O'Callaghan had directed silence, but silence here was impossible. Flying foxes and screech-owls rustled the branches as they fled before the advancing men. Swampy ground had to be negotiated, where the sound of horses' hoofs, splashing in shallow water, was one which the most rigid care could not muffle.

Where the river deviated a little to the north, O'Callaghan, bent on keeping an easterly course, led his men away from its banks and across country. Although well away from the stream, the men still kept to the alluvial flats, expecting to converge on to the Peel again where, running north-west, it afforded a shallow crossing some four or five miles south-west of Mulla Mountain.

At various intervals during the journey across the flats O'Callaghan called a halt and for some minutes the party remained motionless, listening. The hoot of a mopoke, the howl of a dingo to the west of them; bird and animal sounds alone were responsible for these pauses, but the squatter was uneasy. He felt that Bunkiye would follow. But, as the settlers had ridden rapidly away from the homestead for some miles, and had crossed swampy ground where tracks would be obliterated, even if they had been pursued, they should have gained a considerable lead upon the natives. Nevertheless, the squatter ordered an increase of speed. He regarded the danger from blacks—and those persistent calls of bird and animal seemed ominous—greater than the risks attached to fast night riding. Still, the halts were called at intervals. Within a mile of the river crossing, O'Callaghan dismounted, and ordering the others to keep the strictest silence, he doubled back on foot, along their tracks. He returned from the direction of the river, his face very grave.

'Boys,' he said, 'we can go no further.' 'We're completely surrounded by natives.'

The men decided to remain where they were until daylight. There was only an hour to wait, and there would be a great deal of skirmishing and scouting by the blacks before they would be prepared to attack. When daylight came, the white men would be in a superior position. It was a nerve-racking hour. When the light of dawn arrived at last, O'Callaghan made a wary sortie into the surrounding timber. The natives had gone, leaving no traces behind them.

Without difficulty, the settlers crossed the Peel. The sun was rising as they reached a shallow stream about a mile to the north of the river. These waters, O'Callaghan explained to his friends, formed the lower end of a mountain creek, which had its source in the gorge in which Bru Bri was to seek refuge for the white people. The settlers crossed this creek and rode north-east by east for two miles where, in exceedingly mountainous country, they came upon the stream again. It was a mountain rivulet now, wending its turbulent way through valleys and over rocks, almost at the base of the towering mass of the Mulla.

This volcanic outcrop of the Moonbis, with its rugged, pine-

topped foothills, tortuous gullies and ravines, dominated by the mighty Mulla, was strange country to the settlers. In this direction, their riding had never taken them far beyond the northern bank of the Peel. O'Callaghan, however, had received minute directions from Bru Bri; so, without hesitation, he led his men along the winding valley of the stream. For a mile and a half the way led eastward, then it turned abruptly to the north-east. Another half-mile, and Mulla Mountain loomed to the north-west, with the stream converging gradually towards it. The settlers appeared to be riding into the very bosom of the mountain. This was indeed the case. Swinging around a great outcrop of rock, they came across a foaming mass of water pouring over a slanting table of glassy, blue slate from a great gorge which split the mighty mountain in twain. The chief of the Moonbis was right. Here was a refuge which—assuming this to be the only entrance—one rifleman, with plenty of ammunition, could defend against an army.

'Picket your horses, boys,' the squatter shouted above the roar of the falling water. 'We can't get them in there. Looking at it makes me wonder how we are going to get in ourselves.'

The words were scarcely out of his mouth when something chipped the rock at his feet, and the roar of a rifle echoed through the rock-bound gully. O'Callaghan cupped his hands about his mouth and shouted:

'Don't shoot, Alf! It's Cal and the boys. We're coming in.'

There was no reply. Probably had there been, the roaring water would have drowned it. O'Callaghan glanced along the sides of the stream, seeking some easier means of ingress than that afforded by the steep, water-covered, slate buttress. With the impetuosity of youth, Bill Wade bounded past him, and began to scale the slippery incline, the water swirling and gurgling about his knees. With grim determination the young man stuck to his task, his companions cheering as he surmounted the slate and began to draw himself up over a four-foot ledge to the level of the floor of the gorge. He seated himself on the ledge and turned towards the party below. But the smile of triumph faded from his face. A shudder shook his frame and

he fell forward, plunging down the face of the cataract as a rifle cracked in the gorge above. O'Callaghan drew the limp form from the racing water. Bill Wade was dead.

'Take cover,' O'Callaghan shouted to the others. 'God knows what's happening up in that gorge. This can't be a mistake.'

In a hole in the water-worn rocks the three men tried to solve the riddle. Alf and Joe Kane must have recognized Bill. Neither of them could have mistaken him for an enemy in broad daylight. Then there was that first shot.

From far up on the northern side of the Mulla came a faint cry. A hush fell over the three men as they crouched, listening. There it was again—louder this time, as though others were joining in. Louder it grew, until the words became audible.

'*Bunkilla Bula!*' It was the war-cry of the Kamilaroi.

The blacks had forestalled the white men by some other path, and were coming now, across the Mulla. And they were fighting. But who on earth could have engaged their attentions up there on the top of that impregnable mountain?

The question was soon answered. Down the precipitous face of the mountain came Bru Bri, travelling where only an expert Moonbi hunter could go. Bleeding from many wounds, the chief crouched beside his friends.

'Piriwallan,' he gasped, 'last night, the men of the Moonbis heard the hoof beats of our horses, and the evil men from Warrah followed us. When we entered the gorge above us, the white men sat down here and waited, while their chief went prowling along the mountain-tops, seeking a way to enter. At the end of the gorge there is a tiny wallaby track leading down from the Mulla. The evil white chief tried to descend. We watched him from the hole in the mountains. But the way is hard, even for a black man. The evil chief was so far away that the thunder-sticks of our white people could not reach him, as he stood looking down. We taunted him, while keeping a watch on his warriors in the valley, lest they should creep up over the waterfall and attack us.

'With his thunder-stick in his hand, the evil white man jumped to a ledge far below him. Beneath him was a great

rock precipice with a pool of water under it. The evil one could not go up, neither could he climb down. But his thunder-stick is a happy one. It will throw across many clearings. He killed the short little white man who rode with us from your gunyah. Quickly we hid ourselves in the rocks. He laughed, for with his great thunder-stick he threw stones all over the floor of the gorge. He shouted to his warriors, telling them to go back to their hunting-grounds and return with ropes to rescue him from that place where he could neither climb up nor down. They went, but before they went I, who was creeping near them, heard them talking. They would go, but they would not return. They would leave their evil chief there to die, while they stole all the gold of his totem.

‘I talked a little with the white *inargung*, and to him with the wound in his leg. I had a plan to creep through the rocks and slay the evil chief with my war boomerang. But the way was hard and slow. The evil chief had changed his position, though he did not see me. Twice his thunder-stick spoke. Then he began to laugh and shout, and I knew that the white *inargung* and I alone remained alive in the gorge.

‘I rose from the rocks and threw my boomerang and the evil chief fell forward over the precipice, into the pool of water below. Then I saw that he was truly a man of evil medicine. The evil spirits had befriended him. Unharmd, he crawled from the water-hole and took up his thunder-stick which rested on a bed of moss.

‘I raised my spear. It was a long way to throw, and the white *inargung* shouted to me.

“Go, Bru Bri,” she cried, “and warn Piriwallan. With his thunder-stick the evil man can shoot down the mouth of the gorge. But I also have a thunder-stick, and he cannot harm me, nor move from where he is hidden. Warn Piriwallan, and tell him not to approach the mouth of the gorge.”

‘I went. I climbed the face of the mighty Mulla, and I came upon the men of the Moonbis seeking an entrance to the gorge. I fought with them, killing many, and now I am here. The men of the Moonbis seek to enter the gorge from the north. Piriwallan, they are more dangerous enemies than the evil chief

of Warrah. For they can outwit the white *inargung* and place her in his hands. We must lose no time: we must give them battle.'

John was like a man demented. What a frightful ending to the war of the Golden Valley. But was it the end? A demon, armed with a long-range rifle, crouched up there in that impregnable gorge. Even now Mollie might be in his clutches—or dead. Drunken natives roamed the mountain-top, lusting for blood. With great difficulty O'Callaghan restrained the young man from breaking out of cover. The squatter's lips were set hard, his face deathly pale. John turned to him, frantically, but O'Callaghan was speaking softly to the chieftain.

'Bru Bri,' he said, 'you are badly wounded. Remain here and rest.'

But Bru Bri shook his head.

'The chief of the Moonbis does not run away from the battle,' he said. 'I am going to fight.'

O'Callaghan turned to the young settler.

'John,' he said, 'we must drive the blacks off, but before doing so, we'll try to dislodge that devil-protected Ruskin from his position. You remain here. When you hear me shout, climb the waterfall, just as poor Bill did, but take cover as soon as you get to the top. It's a big risk, lad, but there's no other way, now.'

John flashed his friend a look of gratitude and understanding as, with Bru Bri and Allan Kane, the squatter climbed out of the hole, and up the mountainside.

It was a frightful task which they had set themselves—to scale the almost sheer face of the mighty Mulla. The two white men were weary, their nerves on edge; the native chief sorely wounded. Bru Bri took the lead, the others following close upon him, edging up crevices, grasping at jutting outcrops of rock.

They reached the top of the first escarpment and rested awhile. Then on again, soundlessly now, seemingly along the face of the very wall which bounded the gorge. Once Bru Bri spoke, urging them to greater caution, as they approached a slight bend in the ledge along which they were creeping.



Around the bend, Bru Bri pressed his body hard against the mountain wall and pointed down into the gorge. O'Callaghan looked in the direction indicated. Ruskin sat, just out of rifle range, hunched in a niche of rock on the slate floor, gazing along his rifle barrel towards the waterfall.

The squatter raised his weapon.

'I think I can do it,' he whispered. 'At any rate, I can shift him, and give John a chance to get in. Here goes.'

But Bru Bri placed a restraining hand upon his arm.

'Piriwallan,' he whispered, 'the evil chief's thunder-stick throws far. One of us will surely die.'

O'Callaghan studied the distance.

'It might be so, my friend,' he said, 'but we must save the white *inargung* from that evil beast of prey. I must fire, in order to give John a chance to climb over the waterfall. Allan, go with Bru Bri to the top of the mountain, then I will fire.'

Bru Bri would not move.

'Where Piriwallan fights, the chief of the Moonbis fights also,' he said.

O'Callaghan remonstrated with him, telling him that, before they could reach cover, Ruskin would be able to shoot them all down, leaving none to prevent the blacks from entering the gorge. It were better, he argued, for one to die if necessary, than for all to die in vain.

'Bru Bri,' he said, 'I implore you as my friend; take Allan with you and drive the drunken Moonbi warriors away from the top of the Mulla. I need not be killed, for my thunder-stick also throws far.'

Bru Bri and Allan continued along the ledge. O'Callaghan waited until his friends were well beyond the range of Ruskin's rifle, then he raised his weapon, and took long and careful aim. He shouted to John. The ruffian below raised his startled eyes towards the mountain-top as the squatter pressed the trigger. The shot fell short, but the squatter commenced to reload as Ruskin trained his weapon upon him. For O'Callaghan there was no cover and no hope of retreat. A burning pain seared his left shoulder as the rock echoes re-awakened to the roar of the convict's big rifle. Grinding his teeth, O'Callaghan

rammed the charge home and fired again. This time, he fancied his shot had taken effect; for Ruskin bounded from his position to a more sheltered one just as another rifle roared below, and an exultant shout told the squatter that John Kane had entered the gorge.

## CHAPTER XIX

### EVENING UP ACCOUNTS

SLINGING his rifle, O'Callaghan strove with his right hand to staunch the flow of blood from his shoulder as he struggled along the ledge and up the mountainside. He gave no thought to cower now; for he knew that Ruskin, with two enemies in the gorge, would be fully occupied. But an occasional shot and a great deal of shouting above him told him that Bru Bri and Allan had engaged the blacks. Stifling the weakness slowly creeping over him, he pushed resolutely on to assist them. He gained the mountain-top at last, faint from loss of blood, and pushed doggedly across its rocky surface towards the north-west. The sounds of battle had ceased. The squatter found himself wondering wearily what had been the result. He broke through some stunted mountain scrub, and came upon a bloody figure reclining against a rock. It was Bru Bri; and as O'Callaghan sank, exhausted, beside him, the chief opened his eyes, and his bloodstained lips curved in a feeble smile.

'Piriwallan,' he said, 'it was a great battle. The Tribe of the Moonbis is no more. But few warriors remain, and they have departed to the north, from which they will never return. The white boy fought by my side and died as a great warrior should die. Piriwallan, see, beneath us Punnal shines on the great Valley of the Moonbis. See the smoke rolling up from the fires lit by the Moonbi people. See how Punnal shines on the distant mountains of the evil tribe of Warrah. Does he shine because he is pleased, Piriwallan? Does it please him that the hunters of the Moonbis will nevermore track the wallaby in

the mountains, or the kangaroo across the great floor of the valley? Does he shine because the young men will nevermore court the *inargungs* beneath the trees in the shade of the purple mountains? Does he shine because the fire, which he has placed in the hearts of the warriors, has been quenched, and replaced by the evil fire of the white man's magic-water? Is he pleased because the Kamilaroi war-cry will nevermore ring out from the clearings under the light of the moon? You do not answer, Piriwallan. You are weary and you are sick. Then I will answer: *Pital bali kakillan, Piriwallan*—let us rejoice together! Punnal shines because two great chieftains have given their lives in defence of their tribes.'

O'Callaghan, reclining beside his dusky friend, opened his eyes and gazed down over the Golden Valley. He saw the light and the shadow, the smoke and the flame. A great weariness had come over his body, but an exquisite peace had settled on his soul. Reaching out, he caught Bru Bri's hand in his, and held it.

'Bru Bri,' he whispered, feebly, 'Punnal is shining for us. Baiame calls us to His Hunting-grounds. We will go together—we will not be lonely.'

And softly came the answer: '*Tirag bag katan, Piriwallan*. We are men, you and I.'

Again the squatter closed his eyes.

'I am coming, Nance,' he whispered.

And Punnal raised his face from the cloud in which he had hidden it and gazed down upon the deserted gunyahs from which had fled two loyal and magnificent souls. For Baiame had called, and the chieftain spirits of Piriwallan and Bru Bri had answered:

'*Tirag bag katan*—I am ready.'

When John heard O'Callaghan's shout, followed by the report of his rifle, the young man jumped clear of the hole in which he had been sheltering, and began to ascend the waterfall. On reaching the top he took a snap shot at Ruskin, missed, and promptly dived behind a rock. Here he paused a moment to look around him. A sob rose in his throat, as he saw the dead

bodies of his parents, reclining together on the hard, rock bed of the gorge. For a moment he was incapable either of thought or action. Then came a period of blind, impassioned rage. But gradually a sense of his responsibilities awakened his numbed brain. He raised his head cautiously above the rock, only to withdraw it rapidly as he looked into the barrel of Ruskin's rifle. He wondered if it were worth while fighting. His parents were dead. Could Mollie be alive? She must be, otherwise why was Ruskin crouched in the furthest end of the gorge?

He abandoned his position, and crawled away through some loose boulders to his right. Again he raised his head, cautiously, but could not see the ex-convict. He pushed a little further to the right, along slightly rising ground. He thought that the higher the ground beneath him, the greater would be his advantage over his foe. A rifle shot sounded a little in front and to the left and he flattened himself against the rock. Whether the shot had been fired by Ruskin or by Mollie, he did not know. He could hear the distant sounds of fighting on the mountain-top. But, in the gorge, there was silence after the rumbling echoes had faded away. Then he heard running footsteps, and an appealing cry for help. Throwing all caution aside, he leaped to his feet, and bounded across the boulder-strewn ground.

Near him, on a stretch of water-worn slate, Mollie was struggling to break from the grasp of the bearded ex-convict. John levelled his rifle, but Ruskin stood, resolute, knowing that the young man dared not fire, for fear of harming the girl. With his weapon in readiness, John advanced. Ruskin drew Mollie a few paces back along the gorge. He held her firmly with one powerful arm. With his other hand he picked up his rifle from the rocky floor, raised it to his hip and fired.

The young man felt the burning sting of the bullet. Tiny lights and dark spots danced momentarily before his eyes. With a supreme effort of will he braced himself as, through a misty haze, he saw the girl break away from the ex-convict, and face down the gorge. Somehow, John got his rifle to his shoulder, and pulled the trigger. The sound of the shot echoed

through the mountains, rolling and reverberating from precipice to precipice. It seemed as though he could hear it for hours: 'bang—bang—bang!' in the black void into which he had fallen.

John felt as though he had lived through a lifetime—a weird, fantastic lifetime—filled with every conceivable kind of torture. Little black devils came to jeer at him and stab his defenceless body with tiny, red-hot spears. Great red monsters glared and growled at him, coming closer and closer, till he cried out in fear: then a beautiful angel drove them away.

He did not know where he was. There were no surroundings—nothing but black emptiness, and his tormentors. Whenever the angel came near him a great peace came over him. He seemed to look for her coming, even when the black devils and red monsters were not molesting him. Then one night—it was all night to John in this new grotesque life of his—the red monsters caught him, and carried him, in the darkness, to the top of a mighty mountain. He had seen that mountain before, but he could not tell where or when. Far out over the edge they swung him, then let him go. John screamed in terror as he fell, and the angelic shape came out of the darkness, and caught him in its arms. He ceased to fall, and seemed to float out into space, with the angel's arms still holding him. Then peace came to him, and the darkness and everything evil vanished.

Wearily, John opened his eyes. The devils and monsters had left him. The blackness and the angel had gone. Where was he? Where had he been? With sudden interest, he looked around him. He lay on a bed of blankets and bushes, in a blue-walled cave. Idly, he watched a ray of sunlight playing on the floor beside him. He remembered now. He had been shot. But that was years ago—years and years ago. What had happened to everybody? Where was Mollie? Where was Ruskin? And Cal, and Bru Bri and the others?

He was losing consciousness again. The ray of sunlight darkened, then vanished altogether. The angel appeared, standing in the mouth of the cave, looking at him. He tried to speak, but in vain. He attempted to rise, but the angel came

forward and gently forced his head back to the pillow. The angel spoke to him, in a sweet and gentle voice which, somehow, seemed familiar to him.

'You mustn't move, John,' it said. 'You are still very ill.'

For two more days he lay very quiet, sleeping mostly, and gradually recovering his strength and memory.

On the third day after his return to consciousness, Mollie came into the cave and sat on a stone beside him.

'John,' she said, 'you have been ill for a long time. Do you know how long?'

'I don't know,' he replied. 'It seems years.'

'You have been delirious for just on three weeks.'

A faint flush tinged his pale cheeks.

'And you have nursed me all that time, alone?'

The old nervous shyness had returned. He felt uncomfortable.

The girl blushed.

'You saved my life, John,' she said gently. 'And what would I have done if you had died? I haven't yet evened up accounts.'

'Did I kill Ruskin?'

Mollie nodded, and a slight shudder shook her frame.

'Thank God. If ever a man deserved killing it was him. Where's Cal, and Allan and Bru Bri? Don't tell me——'

The look in her eyes was sufficient.

'I guessed as much,' he said. 'There's only you and me left alive.'

Again she nodded, and covered her face with her hands.

What frightful torments and hardships this poor child had suffered! John's parents had died here in this gorge, and Ruskin, O'Callaghan, Bru Bri and Allan had met their ends somewhere near. Somehow, Mollie must have disposed of the bodies of those who fell in the vicinity. Then, a lost waif in this lonely and deserted land, she had turned her hand to nursing a raving and unconscious invalid. How close to death he had been, he did not know. But he knew how impossible he must have been during those terrible hours of tortured darkness. And this slip of a girl had pulled him through. How, he did

not know. She would have had ample provisions in the stores carried up from the homestead; but she had given him invalid's food. At times, he remembered, he had tasted something like chicken broth. She must have brewed this from birds shot in the gorge.

He looked at her now, a tragic waif, her head still buried in her hands. He longed to take her in his arms, to comfort her; but that old, nervous shyness restrained him.

For a long time there was silence. Then, when Mollie looked up, her eyes were swimming.

'John,' she said, 'have you forgotten? I told you that I have not yet evened up accounts.'

For a fleeting second, the young man studied her tear-stained face. Then a great light broke over him and he gasped.

'Heaven's, Mollie,' he cried. 'Can you mean it?'

She nodded, and he took her into his poor weakened arms.

Suddenly Mollie gave a scream.

'John,' she cried, 'there's a blackfellow. He was standing against that big tree on top of the cliff. As soon as I saw him he vanished. He must be behind the tree.'

John struggled to rise.

'I'll see what I can find out,' he said. 'Was he armed?'

'I don't know. I only saw him for a second. He was watching us. Oh, John, don't try to go up there. You're no match for them now—you're too ill. Stay here, and if they attack us, let us fight them from the cave together.'

John looked up again to the cliff top. There was a young aborigine standing in the shadow of the tree trunk. John knew him. He was one of Bru Bri's men, thought to have been killed in the fighting with the convicts. John called to him, and the native climbed down over the rocks. He carried two spears and a boomerang. He reached the base of the cliff, and came slowly forward. He knew very little English, and John's knowledge of the Kamilaroi tongue was poor; but, after a slow and tedious interrogation, and with the help of signs, the black-fellow's story became coherent.

One of Ruskin's bullets, thought to have killed him, had merely cut a groove in his scalp and knocked him unconscious.

When he recovered his senses he was very ill, and remained so for a long time. Wandering around, somewhat dazed, he found himself, eventually, in the vicinity of Warrah, and moved on there to see what was going on. He found the camp besieged by the remnants of Bru Bri's tribe. He spoke to one of them, and learned that they were attacking the white men because the supply of magic drink had been curtailed.

Then he returned to where he had been shot, and from there, picked up the tracks of Bru Bri and the others. A great deal of the valley had been burned out, and there were dead cattle everywhere, many of them speared. But, despite the bushfire, he was able, eventually, to trace Bru Bri to Mulla Mountain. He saw where Bru Bri and Piriwallan had died, and saw the white *inargung* nursing her patient. He had wanted to help, but was afraid that he would frighten her, and that she would run away. He had decided then, to remain in the vicinity, and to guard her against any danger, without making his presence known. He had no tribe now. If she and John would go back to the valley, he would stay with them, and help them with their cattle. He would fight for them too, because they were friends of Bru Bri and Piriwallan.

John told him that the white *inargung* was very tired and he himself was very sick; and they were not able to plan anything for a while; but they would like him to stay with them.

Evening came, and it was one of those glorious, starlit, autumn nights for which the Golden Valley is renowned. The gleaming, early wattle blossoms matched the gold of the moonlight, and the bush-scented air was crisp and intoxicating. John and Mollie sat side by side, on a ledge of rock, idly watching the scintillating lights made by the moon in the babbling stream beneath them. Behind them, well within calling distance, the young blackfellow slept in the smoke of his tiny fire.

The girl took her eyes from the water and proudly surveyed the pensive features of her companion. The old mischievous light was dancing in her eyes.

‘Do you really want me to answer your question?’ she asked.  
‘Of course I do.’



'It was when you made me a cup of tea by your camp-fire, and then offered me that beautiful fish. And you?'

'I think I have always loved you, Mollie,' he said.

Then he told her that he was well enough to travel.

'We've still got plenty of provisions and horses. Let's start for Port Stephens to-morrow. If there isn't a minister there, we can go on down to Newcastle. Then we'll push on to Sydney, and report this whole murderous business to the Governor, and come back and settle in my poor dad's old home.'

Mollie shook her head.

'No, John,' she said. 'I could never live in the Golden Valley again, and I don't think you could either. There are none left to be brought to justice. Ruskin's dead, and the convicts at Warrah are probably dead too, by now. So there's nothing to gain by going to Sydney.'

'Well, then, we'll go to Port Stephens.'

'John,' she said, softly, the shadows hiding her blushes, 'I once heard poor Martin say that the ministers of marriage are really the parties themselves. He said that where the services of a clergyman can't be obtained, two people may pledge themselves, and they are really married. Do you think you could take me, as your wife, to Moreton Bay?'

John could take her around the world. And so, with a silent dusky native as witness, the sacrament of marriage was solemnized on the rocks of Mulla Mountain; and when morning broke, the bride and bridegroom, with a devoted black servant, and with horses and provisions, moved away north towards the Brisbane River.

The manager of the Colonial Pastoral Company shivered with cold as he waited for admission to Government House. He had just landed at Sydney Cove, and the winter westerlies were blowing cold down the harbour. Bourke received him in the great, fire-warmed library.

'Well, Mr. Hardy,' the Governor asked, 'how fares the new settlement at Warrah?'

'Very poorly, Your Excellency,' replied Hardy. 'The natives have given us a great deal of trouble. The main purpose

of my visit is to report a terrible massacre of my men, and of the squatters in the Golden Valley.'

Governor Bourke straightened up in his chair.

'You mean O'Callaghan and his friends? That's incredible. Murdered by blacks? Come, man; tell me what you know.'

Hardy related how he had sent Ruskin and his convict servants to occupy the Company's grant at Warrah. How he had given the foreman power to bargain, in the Company's name, with the Golden Valley settlers. How favourable reports had been sent down to Port Stephens from time to time. And then, for some weeks, there had been complete silence. One morning, a weary emancipist workman had ridden in with a fearful story.

'The fellow told me, Your Excellency, that Ruskin had taken a number of men from the camp and had set out for the north, leaving three servants in this fellow's charge. Ruskin had told the fellow that he had information that the natives were planning an attack upon the settlement, and the foreman was leading an expedition to attack the blacks at their headquarters. He had given frightful warnings of what might happen to the men remaining at Warrah, should they attempt to leave the settlement.

'For a time, Warrah was quiet. Then, one night, the natives attacked for no apparent reason. One man was killed, but the others managed to drive the blacks off for a time. Then others came, and there was more fighting. Early one morning, three of Ruskin's band attempted to come in, but they were speared before they reached the settlement. The natives, in small disorganized parties, were still roaming the outskirts of Warrah and attacking in a sneaking, sporadic manner, when the emancipist got away to Port Stephens for help.

'I immediately took as many men as I could muster, and went to Warrah. The natives had gone when we reached there, but the settlement was in a sorry state. Neither Ruskin, nor any of his men, had succeeded in getting back. No one had any news of the Golden Valley settlers.

I took a strongly armed party and proceeded north from Warrah. Not knowing the country, and having no guide, it was a difficult journey; but I came upon the remains of two of

Ruskin's poor fellows, their bones picked clean by the wild dogs and scavenging birds which frequent the district. These fellows had been speared by natives. I found the charred remains of a homestead, and another small house which had been deserted for some time. I was unable to locate the third station. A great bush fire had devastated a goodly portion of the locality. There were a few neglected cattle in the valley, but most of the stock which the settlers held seemed to have been speared or burned, or to have wandered away into the mountains. In the whole of the journey we neither saw any natives, nor any traces of them. Obviously, fearing punishment for their villainy, they have gone further into the interior.'

The Governor's expression was pained and worried.

'To what do you attribute this massacre?' he asked. 'O'Callaghan told me that the Golden Valley settlers were on excellent terms with the natives. What could have caused such a change of front?'

'I don't know, Your Excellency; but I have a theory, which lays some of the blame at my own door. It is perfectly true that the squatters and the natives were on friendly terms. Although Ruskin was well recommended to me, I did not like the man. But he seemed to have marvellous control over the convict servants. Because of this, and somewhat against my better judgment, I entrusted him with the care of the initial settlement. He must have antagonized the natives in some way, and they became a nuisance to him. Naturally, the people in the Golden Valley would support a fellow white man attacked by natives, and all hands were massacred. I see no other explanation.'

'I fear, Mr. Hardy, that it's just another one of those many sad stories which come in from the back country from time to time,' said Bourke. 'It's a grand spirit which impels these pioneers to settle in the hinterland, but the whole thing is fraught with tragedy. Repeatedly, I have told them that I haven't the resources to protect them; but still they go, and often this sort of thing happens. You have no cause to blame yourself.'

'Could you send up some troopers to make an official investigation, and to find and punish the guilty natives?' Hardy asked.

'No,' replied Bourke. 'As I have said, this is but one of many such tragedies, and I haven't the men available. Neither would there be officers under my command with sufficient knowledge of the natives in the interior to bring the guilty men to justice. They are different people to what we have on the coast, speaking an entirely different language. And, as you suggest, Ruskin himself may have been the guilty party, for all we know; and, obviously, he is dead.'

'I'm sorry, Mr. Hardy, but there is no reasonable action within my power. I think you had better send more experienced and trusted men to Warrah, and get your settlement firmly established there. Come and see me again when this is done, and I'll consider, then, the question of extending your Company's grant.'

Hardy thanked the Governor and returned to Port Stephens.

It is still open to conjecture whether or not John and Mollie and their dusky guide reached Moreton Bay. Possibly they settled on the Darling Downs; for they would have travelled that way, rather than attempt to reach the coast. Possibly they took up land on the Brisbane River. Who knows? So far, history is silent as to their fate.

## EPILOGUE

'WHO gave you all this startling information, Tom?' I asked of the old aboriginal with whom I had been talking since shortly after sunrise. 'Who told you of these people who lived in the valley long ago, of the bad men from the south, of Bru Bri and Biraban and Piriwallan?'

'I had it from my mother, Boss, many years ago,' he replied in his faultless English. 'She was the daughter of Bunkiye, the rebel chief of the Moonbis. Bunkiye was my grandfather.'

'Well, Tom,' I said, 'I must be going, or I'll never get out of these confounded hills before dark.'

The old fellow looked at me with his big soft eyes, then placed a restraining hand on my arm.

'I like you, Boss,' he said simply. 'You are the only white man who has ever heard my story. You are tired, and it's a long way back to your home. Will you sleep in my hut to-night? It is not far down the gully.'

I turned the offer over in my mind. Truly I was tired; for I had hunted far that day, over wild and inhospitable country. I had come across the old fellow, engrossed in thought, on the top of Mulla Mountain. It was the first time I had succeeded in gaining the top of the Mulla, and the sunlit panorama below had so entranced me that I had sat there for hours, fascinated, while listening to the old man's story. Then he had hunted with me a little, showing me the water-worn chasm which guarded the back of the towering mountain. I had shot a few wallabies, but the prospect of that fagging climb back to the valley below made me realize how really tired I was.

'Very well, Tom,' I said, 'I'll put in the night with you, Which way do we go?'

We were climbing down the mountain-flanked valley of a tiny, rock-bedded stream as the old fellow made his offer. We rounded a bend and came upon his log hut, nestling upon a grassy flat, almost against the wall of the mountain.

The old chap was an expert cook, and soon I found myself enjoying a meal of stewed rabbit, kangaroo soup and damper. When the meal was over, Tom dug out a jar of tobacco, and we filled our pipes and sat on the grassy sward, watching the shadows lengthen as the sun sank to rest behind the Mulla.

For a long time the old fellow was silent, meditatively blowing smoke through his long, white beard. I thought he had something to tell me, but I refrained from questioning him. I just sat still and waited. Presently he spoke.

'Boss,' he said, 'I showed you the place, to-day, where the two great chieftains died on the top of the mountain; and, even as they died, gazed down in admiration over the great valley beneath them.'

I nodded, but made no comment.

'Boss,' he went on, 'have you ever watched the lightning play along the tops of the Mulla?'

Again I nodded. From my home, away down in the valley, I had often watched the storm clouds gather there.

'Have you ever noticed the lightning play in times of drought, when the grass is withered, and when the trees are dying in the valley?'

I had.

'Have you ever seen the rain cross the Mulla and give drink to the parched land beneath?'

No, I had not. In the severest of droughts I had seen rain clouds break over Mulla Mountain, but never had I seen them cross the barrier. The droughts on the Peel seemed always to break from the west, or the north-west.

There was another long interval of silence. Then the old chap went on.

'Boss,' he said, 'many years ago, my mother drew me from a clump of grass in the valley while my people were slinking around the camps of the white settlers. I was but a child then,

but because of the things which she told me, that night still remains in my memory.

“Look, Tom,” she said—I had another name then, but I forget what it was—“Look, Tom. See the lightnings play on the top of the mighty Mulla. Hear the thunder growl as the black clouds roll and twine around the mountain. The spirit of Piriwallan lives in the lightning. The spirit of Bru Bri roars in the thunder. They are fighting, Tom. Fighting side by side, as they fought there many summers ago; for Baiame has cursed the white people who dwell here in the Valley of the Moonbis. He has cursed them, because of the wrong which the evil medicine of their fathers wrought on the tribes of Bru Bri and Piriwallan. Always, the spirits of the two mighty chieftains will live in the bosom of the Mulla; and when the rain clouds gather to bring wealth and happiness to the tribes of the Gold Totem, Baiame sends his message stick to the spirits of Bru Bri and Piriwallan.

“Arise,” he calls to them. “Arise and fulfil the curse with which I have blighted the Valley of the Moonbis.”

‘That is what happens, Boss. Then it is that Bru Bri and Piriwallan rise in the thunder and lightning, and fight beside each other again as they fought many summers ago. Then it is that they drive the rain clouds back from the valley.’

The old fellow finished. The spell of his words came over me—the words of that old native woman, his mother. I looked up, uneasily, half-expecting to see the ghosts of the two dead chieftains of more than a century ago descend through the eerie blackness which now enveloped the mountain. From afar, up in the rocky chasm, came the mournful howl of a dingo. With a shiver, I rose, and turned my face to the welcome light of the fire. I went to bed, and dreamed of many things.















